

**Teenage Dreams: An Examination of Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachments**

**By**

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## **DEDICATION**

For Catherine, who took me to see *Twilight* and whose love of Edward Cullen at age 22 provided the initial idea for this dissertation. You always believe I can do anything. I believe the same of you.

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## CHAPTER I

### **Toward a Theoretical Model of Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachments**

From Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* to *Twilight*'s Edward and Bella, the drama of early love has captivated audiences for centuries. Perhaps, this fascination stems from our own intense memories of the emotional rollercoaster of first love. Developmentally, early adolescent experiences with romance are serious, emotionally charged undertakings with consequential developmental implications. Early romantic experiences can shape long-term romantic relationship quality, relationship satisfaction, identity development, and overall wellbeing (Furman & Shaffer, 2013), and can also influence identity, changes in family and peer relationships, career planning, and developing sexuality (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009).

Given their centrality in human development, it is important to understand the full developmental range of romantic orientations and experiences in adolescence, from the earliest experiences with crushes to engagement in serious committed romantic relationships (B.B. Brown, 1999). However, current theoretical models of romantic development generally begin with experiences of attachment to or crushes on peers, assuming that all experiences of romance must occur in person and involve the potential for interaction (B.B. Brown, 1999). In fact, adolescents' earliest romantic experiences are often romantic attachments to distant figures such as celebrities and media personae (Karniol, 2001). These attachments provide a baseline level of knowledge and set expectations for young adolescents experiencing romantic feelings for the first time (Karniol, 2001; Miller & Benson, 1999).

Fans' romantic attachments to media personae are a normative part of our social world and cultural history. Images of screaming Beatles and Elvis fans in the 1950s and 1960s are as familiar to us as more recent stories of Bieber-fever. In this dissertation, I develop a model of these attachments, termed Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment (ARPA), which accounts for their complexity and nuance. Using a multi-methodological, interdisciplinary approach, this dissertation engages in an in-depth examination of adolescent romantic attachment to celebrities, including qualitative testimonies from young women who have experienced these relationships, the creation of a new quantitative measure of Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment, and an exploration of how this new measure relates to beliefs, ideas, and behaviors associated with sexual socialization.

### **Literature Review**

Relationships with fictional or celebrity characters are a normal and common occurrence in adolescence (Caughey, 1984; Giles, 2002; Horton & Wohl, 1956). It is not unusual to find teen bedrooms peppered with posters of their favorite media figures (Steele & Brown, 1995), or teen blogs devoted to fandom. In a study of college students, Spitzberg and Cupach (2007) found that 90% had been attracted to a celebrity at some point in their lives. Additionally, a content analysis of college students' fan letters to celebrities revealed that 25% expressed a wish to be in a romantic relationship with the addressee (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2008).

Adolescence is a pivotal time in social development as children make the transition from a parent-centered home to a school and peer-centered life, where they begin to explore, test, and determine their adult identities (Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Greene & Adams-Price, 1990). Relationships with media figures—referred to as parasocial relationships—provide a means for adolescents to explore and define their romantic and sexual identities (Boon & Lomore, 2001;

Engle & Kasser, 2005; Karniol, 2001). Initial evidence on non-romantic parasocial relationships suggests that adolescent romantic attachment to media figures could influence a) interpretation of media (Cohen, 2002, 2003), b) the development of relational scripts, schemas, and normative beliefs (Basil, 1996), c) future partner preferences (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990; Burnett & Beto, 2000), d) relationship expectancies (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990; Burnett & Beto, 2000, Segrin & Nabi, 2002), and ultimately, e) relational happiness and overall wellbeing (Galliher, Rostosky, Welsh, & Kawaguchi, 1999; Johnson, Kent & Yale, 2012).

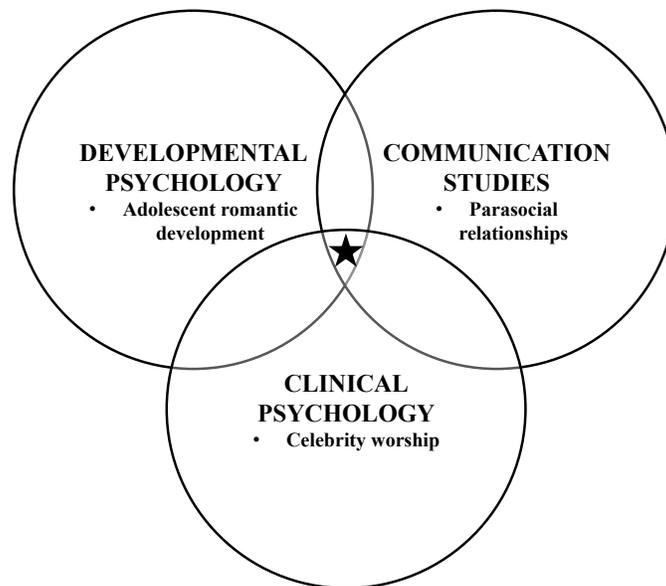
However, in the scholarly literature on youth development, adolescents' romantic attachments to media figures are sometimes ignored or dismissed as frivolous (Caughey, 1984; Jenkins, 1992; Willis, 1972). With the exception of work from scholars such as Henry Jenkins (1992) and Mark Duffett (2013), theoretical discussions that do focus on fan romantic attachment seem to emphasize extremes such as celebrity stalking (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2008) and fan violence (Caughey, 1984). I argue that research on the experiences of young adolescent fans is often under-theorized, under-studied, and over-pathologized (Jenson, 1992). In this dissertation, I consider the possible developmental role of parasocial romantic relationships for adolescents and the long-term influence of fan-figure relationships on sexual and romantic socialization.

Theoretically-driven work, which addresses the experience of romantic attachment to media figures as a common, developmentally-appropriate phenomenon that has implications for the socialization of adolescents into the worlds of sex and relationships, is necessary. We must approach the study of adolescent romantic attachment to media figures in a nuanced manner, accounting for the full complexity of these attachment experiences by integrating theory and empirical findings from the multiple literatures that have touched upon this issue.

In this dissertation, I introduce a model of Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment (ARPA), designed to facilitate a comprehensive, developmentally-based line of research that improves our understanding of the ways in which adolescents experience parasocial romance and the influence their experiences may have on their lives. Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment can be defined as perceived romantic relationships with media figures in adolescence, which (a) involve the investment of time, energy, and emotion on the part of the adolescent; (b) are mediated; and (c) involve some degree of idealization. A key objective of this approach is to reject a derisive and pathologizing perspective on fan-figure attachment, and instead focus on developmental processes that may influence and motivate these fan-figure relationships, helping to explain their ubiquity in adolescent development.

Figure I.1

*Relevant areas of literature.*



As depicted in Figure I.1, current theorizing about adolescent experiences with romantic parasocial relationships primarily comes from the fields of (1) Developmental Psychology, where the focus has been on adolescent romantic and sexual development; (2) Communication,

where the focus has been on parasocial relationships in general; and (3) Clinical Psychology, where the focus has been the clinical significance of celebrity worship. I will briefly review the relevant research from each of these fields, discussing the points of intersection (where they exist) and highlighting gaps in the research, before explicating my model of Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment and finally providing an outline of the remaining chapters of the dissertation in which I test this model empirically.

### **Developmental Psychology: Adolescent Romantic and Sexual Development**

Adolescence is a pivotal period in the development of identity and the navigation of shifting relationships (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Moving from a childhood social world, traditionally organized around family, to a world of peers and romantic relationships represents a critical transition that can be confusing and overwhelming (Greene & Adams Price, 1990). Social and biological changes in early adolescence co-create a unique moment in development during which engagement with media and attachment to media figures becomes especially common and appealing.

The onset of puberty in adolescence triggers a number of important biological, physical, and neurological changes. The cyclical hormone surges of puberty, as in infancy, heighten the importance of communication and social relationships for adolescents (Brizendine, 2006). Compared with adult brains, adolescent brains display higher activation of the “social brain” (largely made up of the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC), the posterior superior temporal sulcus (pSTS), and the anterior temporal cortex (ATC)), indicating heightened salience of the social world at this stage of development (Blakemore, 2012; Blankstein, Chen, Mincic, McGrath, & Davis, 2009).

Biologically, young adolescents (ages 10-13) are developmentally disposed to seek out romantic experiences (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). The hormonal and neurological changes occurring during adolescence are also associated with visible physical changes, which may affect the way a given adolescent understands their identity and how they are seen by the surrounding world (Feiring, 1999). Importantly, puberty in the United States is occurring approximately five years earlier than it did in the earlier half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and as a result, adolescents are exploring romantic emotions and experiences at an earlier age, even if only through the responses of others to their physical appearance (Larson, Clore, & Wood, 1999).

As these biological changes occur, children and adolescents are also receiving information about social norms and appropriate behaviors from the world around them. Parents, peers, and other influential figures teach children how to interact with each other and the world, what identity characteristics are encouraged, what is valued in relationships, and who the acceptable partners and friends are (Maccoby, 2007). Adolescents employ these social lessons in completing the key tasks of this period of development: developing concrete identities, transforming family and peer relationships, developing sexuality, and beginning the path to a career (Erikson, 1968; Furman & Shaffer, 2003). With these lessons, the focus on social relationships prompted by biological changes is strengthened. At the same time, adolescents face increasing pressure to “fit in” socially, leading to increased sensitivity to peer rejection and social norms (Blakemore, 2012).

One of the most challenging aspects of adolescent socialization is initiation into the world of dating and romantic relationships (Shulman & Seiffe-Krenke, 2001). Using information from early romantic interactions both observed and experienced, adolescents must develop appropriate and accurate scripts, schemas, beliefs, and behaviors for romantic relationships (Furman &

Simon, 1999). Initial attraction to romantic partners and entry into the realm of romantic experience generally begins in the first half of middle school, around the ages of 10-12 (B.B. Brown, 1999). In a nationally representative sample of adolescents, 25% of 12-year-olds reported having a “special romantic relationship” in the past 18 months, whereas by age 16, over 50% of adolescents report experiencing a romantic relationship within the last 18 months (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). These statistics demonstrate the increasing importance and centrality of romantic relationships across adolescent development and the importance of early adolescence as a time of experimentation and learning, prior to reciprocal dyadic romantic engagement.

B. B. Brown (1999) defines four stages of adolescent romantic development: initiation, status, affection, and bonding. Early romantic experiences occur in two stages and focus on the development of individual identity and relationship context. The first stage, initiation, can involve crushes or early relationships, but the focus is on identity development and mastery of romantic knowledge and skills (B. B. Brown, 1999; Shulman & Seiffe-Krenke, 2001). The second stage, status, revolves around status within the peer group. In this stage, adolescents work to determine who peers will accept as an appropriate partner and what behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs about romantic relationships are acceptable within the peer group (B.B. Brown, 1999). The final two stages of development, affection and bonding, focus more on the romantic relationship itself than the individual or the context; the final stage reflects a mature bonded romantic partnership.

Early adolescents entering the initiation stage of B.B. Brown’s model typically have very little experience with ongoing romantic relationships and must rely on vicarious learning and episodic romantic experiences to guide their actions. However, even before they have these experiences, young adolescents already have a sense of the norms and expectations of romantic

relationships and experiences from various socializing agents including peers, parents, community, and media (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009; Ward, 2003). In the initiation stage (B.B. Brown, 1999), adolescents are novices at romance and usually begin to experience it by having crushes before initiating actual relationships (Furman & Simon, 1999). These romantic experiences can range from fantasies to interpersonal interactions such as watching a romantic movie, having a crush, talking about possible romantic partners with friends, going on a date, and so on (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009).

**Media and Romantic Socialization.** Past scholarly work on sexual socialization indicates that young adults turn to media to establish norms about sex and relationships. Ninety-four percent of youth indicate that they seek information about romantic love from TV and movies (Ward, 2002). Media portrayals of sex and relationships influence adolescents' attitudes and beliefs (related to sex, gender, relationships, gender roles, and sexual agency), and also their behaviors (in particular safe sex practices and sexual initiation; see Ward, Erickson, Lippman, & Giaccardi, 2016 for a review of media and sexual socialization literature).

Although many have rightly raised concerns about adverse media effects on adolescents (Kim, Sorsoli, Collins, Zylbergold, Schooler, & Tolman, 2007; Kirsch & Murnen, 2015; Ward, 2003), media can also be a source of empowering information and developmental opportunities. The media provide adolescents with a chance to see the world outside their communities and to experiment with identities unavailable to them in their immediate environment (Gray, 2009). Media exposure may also provide fodder for fantasies, a critical element of development (Miller & Benson, 1999).

One way in which media act as socialization agents for adolescents is by providing a platform for the development of adolescent attachment to media figures. The combination of

hyper-sociality and hyper-sensitivity to rejection that comes with puberty creates a fertile environment for celebrity attachment. Romantic attachment to celebrities can satisfy increasing interest in romance and sexuality while minimizing risk, conflict, and rejection—all major concerns in romantic relationships (Fisher, 2006; Karniol, 2001). Relationships with media figures provide a safe space for the exploration of sexuality and identity for adolescents.

Ultimately, the combination of neurological development, hormonal changes, increasingly outwardly oriented social worlds, and sexual socialization creates an ideal environment for adolescents to engage with celebrity culture in a romantic manner. However, although research psychologists have examined the role of media in romantic and sexual development, few have explored viewer *relationships* with media figures as developmentally significant phenomena (Ward, 2002).

### **Communication Studies: Parasocial Relationships**

In the communications literature, viewer relationships with media figures are known as parasocial relationships. Originally theorized by Horton and Wohl (1956), parasocial relationships are defined as relationships with media figures that are functionally similar to relationships with real people. Parasocial relationships are unidirectional, mediated attachments involving viewers' cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to a media figure (Giles, 2002; Klimmt, Hartmann & Schramm, 2006).

Initial work on parasocial relationships focused on audience members and non-fictional media personalities such as newscasters. However, this work has been expanded to incorporate media figures of all types, from celebrities and non-fictional characters to fictional and even fantasy figures. Further, researchers have differentiated types of parasocial interaction,

developing scales for parasocial friendship, parasocial identification, admiration, and parasocial romantic love (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000; Tukachinsky, 2010).

**Parasocial Romance.** Parasocial romantic relationships are characterized by perceived physical and emotional intimacy with a media figure (Tukachinsky, 2010). Parasocial romantic relationships involve the feeling of being in love with or having a strong crush on a media figure and are especially powerful and ubiquitous in adolescents (Greene & Adams-Price, 1990). These relationships are a frequent and important aspect of adolescent development, allowing adolescents to safely explore adulthood with minimal sexual, social, or emotional risk (J.D. Brown, Barton White, & Nikopoulou, 1993; Engle & Kasser, 2005; Karniol, 2001). In mediated social relationships, the audience member has complete control over the interaction and, without fear of rejection or social conflict, can break off or increase the intensity of the relationship at any point (Theran, Newberg, & Gleason, 2010). Current research on parasocial love focuses on similarities between parasocial and reciprocal relationships with less attention to the mediated nature of these relationships or their developmental functionality. For example, Tukachinsky's (2010) Multiple PSR Scale includes a parasocial love measure. However, although this scale accounts for the experience of parasocial love, Tukachinsky focuses on the similarities between parasocial love and reciprocal romantic relationships. The current work, while complementary, attends specifically to the developmental perspective and also places particular emphasis on the mediated nature of the parasocial (i.e. their unidirectionality).

### **Clinical Psychology: Celebrity Worship**

In contrast to communication scholars' focus on similarities between "real" and parasocial relationships, research in clinical psychology on celebrity worship accounts for both developmental and media factors. Celebrity worship, also referred to as idolization or "having a

crush” on a celebrity, is defined as “an unreciprocated attachment to another characterized by frequent occurrence of fantasies in which the personal qualities of the other are greatly enhanced or idealized” (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990, p. 187). This definition immediately highlights the distance between the object of the crush (the celebrity) and the person with the crush (the viewer) and distinguishes their distanced relationship from reciprocated interpersonal relationships. Whereas parasocial relationship research focuses primarily on similarities to “real” relationships with little attention to developmental considerations, work on celebrity worship focuses extensively on the mediated nature of these experiences, and, in the sub-field of celebrity idolization, researchers specifically examine adolescent development and how developmental stages may influence idolization practices, choices, and experiences.

Celebrity worship as a means of controlled self-socialization to romance is explored extensively in this literature (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990; Greene and Adams-Price, 1990; Willis, 1972). Adolescents may also turn to celebrity worship or idolization as a way to sublimate romantic and sexual yearnings toward peers in their daily life (Karniol, 2001). Idealizing the celebrity object is particularly important to these discussions of the celebrity worship process. Fans can project idealized qualities onto the celebrity object to fit their own needs and desires (Fraser & Brown, 2002). For adolescents, celebrity worship is a means to explore their romantic identities and practice for reciprocal romantic relationships. Adolescents can use parasocial relationships to get to know their own feelings and fantasies in order to develop models, scripts, and schemas about romantic relationships (Engle & Kasser, 2005).

Celebrity worship is most commonly measured by assessing tendencies to worship a celebrity that involve emotional attachment, obsessive thoughts, and specific fan behaviors (McCutcheon, Lange & Houran, 2002). Three levels of celebrity worship have been identified in

this literature: entertainment-social, intense-personal, and borderline-pathological (McCutcheon et al., 2002). The entertainment-social level of celebrity worship reflects engagement with celebrities solely for entertainment and does not involve emotional attachment. Intense-personal levels of celebrity worship include a strong attachment and imagined closeness to the celebrity figures, and involve the devotion of time, energy, and resources to fan practices. Borderline-pathological level fans are those who take celebrity worship to a compulsive level and are likely to engage in more extreme behaviors such as celebrity stalking (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2008).

As a result of the epidemiological emphasis in clinical psychology, research in this area has primarily focused on diagnosing clinically addressable problems related to pathology in fans (often using adult samples). For example, McCutcheon, Ashe, Houran and Maltby (2003) found a correlation between what they call “obsessional tendencies” (p. 311) among fans (scores at the intense-personal and borderline-pathological levels) and lower psychological wellbeing and educational attainment. However, their findings (which also include negative relations between celebrity worship and creative ability, spatial reasoning, and critical thinking) are correlational and cannot be used to support a causal argument. The same group of authors also found that celebrity worship was associated with lower levels of social complexity, less cognitive flexibility, and increased depressive symptoms (Maltby, McCutcheon, Ashe, & Houran, 2001). This focus on the extremes of fandom serves to identify cases with clinical importance and diagnostic implications but, in doing so, minimizes the quotidian and ubiquitous nature of fan idolization in adolescent development and sets aside possible advantages of this fandom. However, if the potential for both adaptive *and* adverse functions of fan parasocial relationships is acknowledged, new and fruitful areas of research and opportunities to better understand this phenomenon and its role in development will emerge.

In general, researchers in the area of celebrity worship conclude that the connections they have observed are generally negative and troubling. However, from the perspective of adolescent development and communications, celebrity worship, particularly at the “middle” intense-personal level—about which some psychologists have expressed concerns (Maltby et al., 2001)—seems to reflect “normal” parasocial relationships for adolescents. Communication scholars argue that these types of relationships to media figures are not pathological or inherently troubling at all and are, in fact, a normal consequence of engagement with media (Giles, 2002). Given the heightened emotional states of adolescence, intense-personal attachments to celebrities may be more intense and more personal in this audience than they are among adults (Karniol, 2001). Additional empirical and theoretical work is needed to clarify the magnitude of adolescent romantic attachment to celebrities and to address how it might compare to such attachments in childhood and adulthood.

### **Open Questions and Concerns**

Each of these three bodies of literature examines some form of adolescent romantic development and the role of media and parasocial relationships in that development. Developmental psychologists provide models of the stages of adolescent romantic development and the social and biological factors influencing this development (B.B. Brown, 1999; Furman & Shaffer, 2003). However, many psychologists address the media with which adolescents engage as an aside rather than as a central socializing agent and rarely examine variations in media engagement. In contrast, communication researchers examine parasocial relationships but focus mainly on adults or young children and the extent to which these parasocial attachments align with interpersonal relationships. Explorations of adolescent parasocial relationships, particularly those of a romantic nature, are scarce. Finally, clinical research on celebrity worship has focused

on the role of idolization or worship of celebrities in outcomes that are significant for therapeutic or psychiatric reasons. As a result, extensive attention has been paid to rare problematic outcomes, leaving experiences common to many adolescents either ignored or (perhaps unintentionally) pathologized. None of this work sufficiently examines adolescent romantic parasocial relationships as developmentally common, useful, or complex phenomena.

Despite a shared concern with adolescent celebrity attachment, there is limited dialogue between the literatures on adolescent development, parasocial interaction, and celebrity worship. A theoretical explication of Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment (ARPA) must occur at the nexus of these three literatures: taking into account the powerful role of development in shaping these relationships, focusing on adolescence as an especially potent moment for romantic socialization and the development of parasocial romantic relationships, and limiting the pathologizing of fan experiences. The ARPA model, proposed below, follows this approach, providing the structure for more in-depth study of the causes, practices, gratifications, and effects of parasocial romantic experiences for adolescents.

### **The Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment Model**

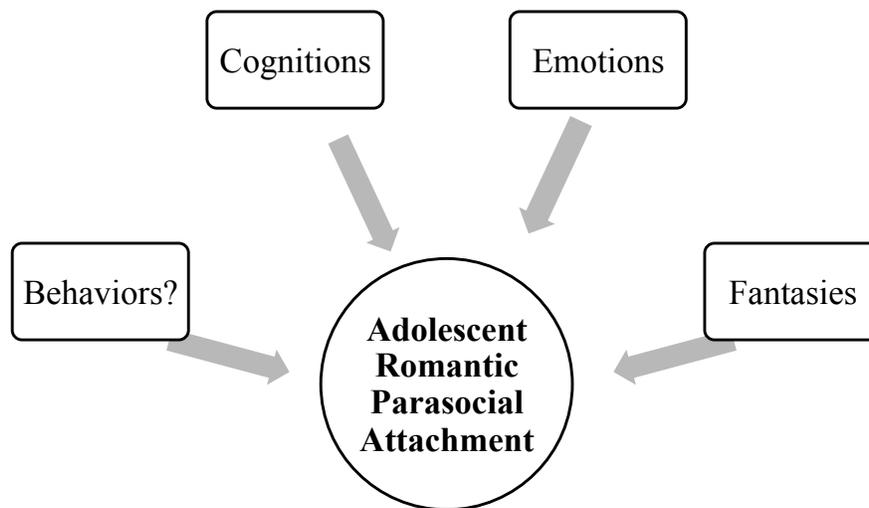
Adolescent romantic parasocial relationships are common and consequential developmental experiences. These relationships are motivated (Karniol, 2001), measurable (Tukachinsky, 2010), and have implications for adolescent development (Greene & Adams-Price, 1990). Through the ARPA model, I propose approaching these experiences from a phenomenological orientation that emphasizes their multi-dimensional nature.

Building on past literature, I view ARPA to be composed of four key elements: emotions, cognitions, fantasies, and behaviors (Klimmt et al., 2006; Shulman & Seiffge-Krenke, 2001).

Each aspect of the model (Figure I.2) contributes unique characteristics to ARPA and captures different aspects of ARPAs.

Figure I.2

*Components of Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment.*



### **Components of Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment**

**Emotions.** Emotions in parasocial relationships are generally related to connection with, or emotional responses to, media figures (Klimmt et al., 2006). Connections with media figures are activated in viewers' empathic reactions to these figures. Trait empathy, specifically empathic concern and perspective taking, increases the likelihood of transportation into a narrative and the salience of fan identity (Taylor, 2015). The adolescent imagines what that person might be feeling and shares the emotion with the media figure (Klimmt et al., 2006). For example, when a media figure loses a loved one, a young woman with a romantic parasocial attachment to that media figure may feel grief and sadness at the loss or at the perceived sadness

of the star. This is not a conscious response. As in interpersonal relationships, fans feel empathy toward those with whom they perceive an emotional connection. Because the object of their affection is grief-stricken, so are they. In addition to empathic reactions, emotional responses to media figures may involve self-generated emotions (Klimmt et al., 2006). These responses are about the individual and the relationship she imagines between herself and the media figure. For example, after a long week at school, an adolescent girl returning to her bedroom full of posters of her favorite media figure might feel excitement or joy at the idea of relaxing on her bed and fantasizing about this media figure.

**Cognitions.** Cognitions associated with ARPAs involve attention allocation, making connections, and script and schema development (Klimmt et al., 2006). Adolescents spend a lot of time thinking about romantic partners (or potential romantic partners or crushes), and thoughts about romance and sex often precede sexual involvement in adolescent development (Furman & Simon, 1999; Miller & Benson, 1999). Allocation of attention to thoughts about a media figure is a defining feature of ARPA.

Beyond this allocation of cognitive attention to the media figure, ARPA are also characterized by cognitions related to evaluation and comparison that help the adolescent make connections and draw conclusions (Klimmt et al., 2006). When thinking about their celebrity attachment, adolescents attempt to comprehend behaviors, ideas, and news about that celebrity; they make observations about the celebrity and attempt to anticipate future behaviors (e.g., Will he agree to be in that movie? Does he really love his girlfriend?). In their exploration of identity, adolescent fans also examine the ways that they are both similar to and different from their media attachments. As I will demonstrate in Chapter II, adolescents use these evaluations to help them think through both their own identity and the identity of future partners. In ARPA, these

types of cognitions can involve evaluating shared traits, considering ways to help or support the media figure, and attempting to learn as much as possible about the media figure. In the current media environment, social media may play a critical role in this process, providing a site for information gathering and potential interaction with media figures.

Finally, perhaps the most studied cognitions in adolescence are scripts and schemas. Through parasocial relationships, adolescents learn how to act, what to believe, and what to value in romantic and sexual relationships. In the course of an ARPA experience, an adolescent has the opportunity to engage in experimentation with romantic scripts, to learn scripts and schemas vicariously through the observation of the media figure, and to use discussions of the media figure with peers to gauge norms and ideals.

**Fantasies.** Although peer interactions and other external factors play a role in adolescent romantic development, in the case of ARPA, internal factors, particularly fantasies, are especially important. Fantasy is a major means of exploration of self and other in romance. Imagination and fantasy play a strong role in all social relationships (Giles, 2002). Through imagining or fantasizing future scenarios with others, individuals can rehearse for future interactions. For adolescents considering entry into the dating world, fantasy is a healthy part of development and plays a prime role in the sexual and romantic lives of adolescents (Willis, 1972). Additionally, lack of experience with real relationships may lead to an increased need for fantasy throughout the sexual socialization process. In Moffitt's (1993) study of teen romance readers, the experiences of fantasy were "an actual source of reality and a means for them to experience through the text their expected identities as adult, woman, and lover" (p. 245).

Caughey (1984) defines fantasy as a subjective experience, separated from reality, in which one can explore the fulfillment of unconscious wishes and personal gratifications, and

argues that media, particularly narrative media, are designed specifically to invoke fantasizing in viewers. Beyond being transported into the fantasy world of the narrative, however, parasocial relationships with media figures often involve fans creating fantasies of their own in which the media figure and fan interact. In fact, the fantasized version of a media figure is potentially more salient to an adolescent than the version of himself that the media figure presents to the public (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990). Following object-relations theory, fanship involves attachment to internal representations, not actual people (Stever, 2009). Fantasies built on these internal representations allow viewers to develop parasocial relationships that feel intimate and accessible despite the limitations on actual access to media figures (Giles, 2002).

By imagining and fantasizing about a relationship with a media figure, adolescents can access and understand their feelings and emotions related to romance (Engle & Kasser, 2005). Fantasy interactions are safe, secure, and controlled by the fan (Engle & Kasser, 2005). They allow not only the fantasy of being in a relationship with a media figure but also the possibility of a fantasy self who engages in this relationship (Caughey, 1984). In these relationships, fans can be their best selves and they can project their desired qualities onto celebrities based on limited information from media sources.

**Behaviors.** Another likely expression of Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment (explored extensively in the fan studies literature) occurs through adolescent behaviors. Steele and J. D. Brown's (1995) Media Practice Model highlights the interplay between media selection, behaviors, and identity development in adolescent audiences. However, behaviors are often associated with pathology (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2008) and vary greatly across participants due to structural factors such as means, access, and mobility; therefore, they do not indicate degree of fanship by themselves. For example, waiting outside a TV studio to meet a Hollywood star or

going to all of a certain musician's concerts might not be possible for an adolescent living with limited financial means or in a remote or rural location (as will be discussed in Chapter II). Fan literature often defines fandom solely by behavior (e.g., creating fan art, attending events) and thereby fails to acknowledge that, for many, fandom is a personal and private experience that may involve few overt behaviors (Engle & Kasser, 2005). However, given that many fans do engage in behaviors, they are important to consider and understand. A variety of behaviors associated with Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachments are discussed in Chapter II.

These components of ARPA, although described as theoretically distinct, are likely to be mutually constitutive, and the lines between them are perhaps not so clear in the lived experiences of fans.

### **ARPAs in the Trajectory of Romantic Development**

Together, cognitions, emotions, and fantasies form the basis of complex, multi-dimensional romantic attachments to media figures during adolescence. These attachments provide a safe space for the exploration of identity, romance, and sexuality for young adolescents and fit well into the trajectory of adolescent romantic relationship development proposed by B.B. Brown (1999). B.B. Brown's four stages of romantic relationship development—initiation, status, affection, and bonding—begin with unrequited romantic relationships in early adolescence. These early romantic experiences provide the foundation upon which romantic scripts, schemas, and beliefs are built. However, B.B. Brown's work does not centrally engage the possibility that mediated romantic experiences may ease the transition to adult relationships and the development of healthy self-image and identity in adolescence (Theran et al., 2010).

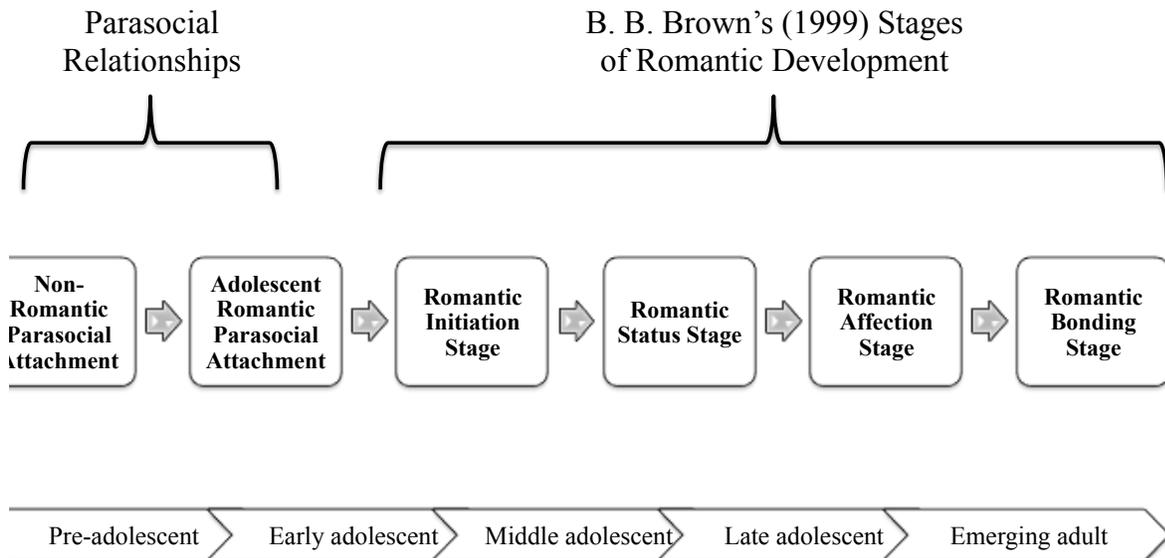
As depicted in Figure I.3, I argue that ARPAs may join the trajectory of adolescent romantic development as an important precursor to B.B. Brown's initiation stage. Karniol (2001)

proposes a model involving the evolution of media attachment objects across girls' development, beginning with initial attachments to female role model figures, shifting to attachments to feminized males in early adolescence and more masculine males later in adolescence. Work from Greene and Adams-Price (1990) and Engle and Kasser (2005) supports this pattern. Given this proposition, I propose that, for most adolescents, first ARPAs occur prior to early interpersonal romantic experiences.

Although depicted linearly, these relationships likely continue throughout adolescence and even into adulthood as romantic development evolves. B. B. Brown's (1999) model assumes linear development and a fixed end point—stable, long-term romantic attachment. It is worth noting that a) such clean linear development is unlikely, and b) stable, long-term romantic attachment as

Figure I.3

*ARPA and the trajectory of romantic development.*

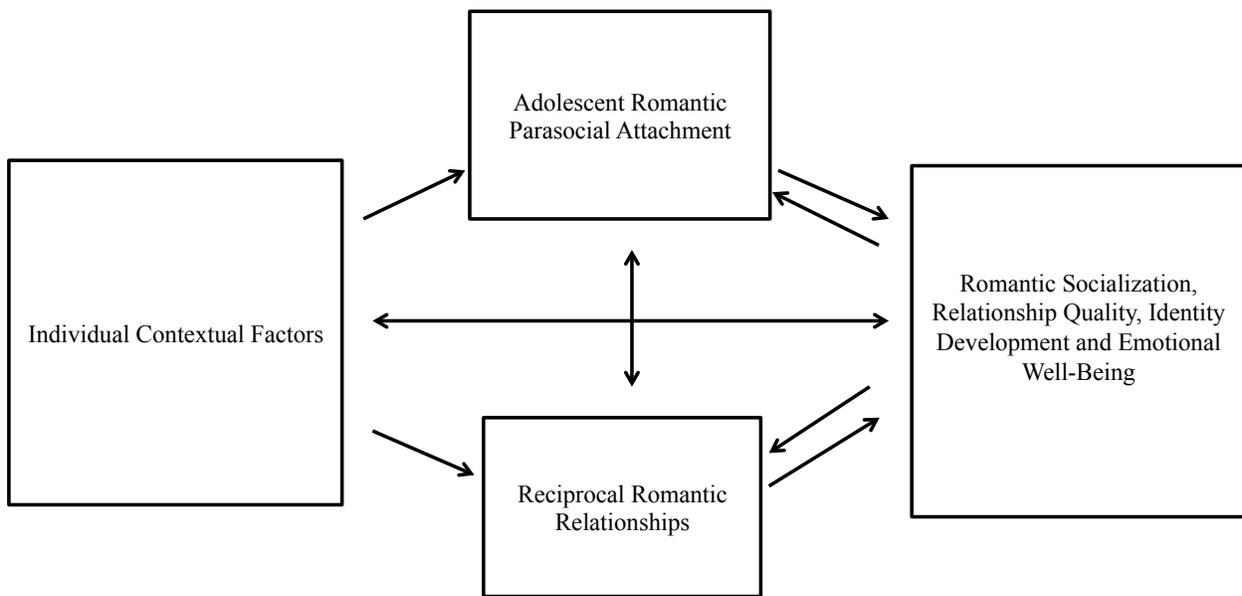


an indicator of completed romantic development does not take into account those for whom this endpoint is not desired or achieved (Collins & van Dulmen, 2006).

Given their early emergence and documented role in script and schema development, it is likely that ARPAs play a role in overall adolescent romantic and sexual development. In early adolescence, accumulating romantic experiences is an important task that helps build romantic identities and relationships. These experiences can shape schema, scripts, normative beliefs, and partner preference in adolescents (Greene & Adams-Price, 1990; Miller & Benson, 1999).

Figure I.4

*New developmental model of adolescent romantic development.*



Romantic experiences encompass all activities and cognitions related to romantic relationships—this includes interpersonal romantic relationship experiences but also cognitive and emotional phenomena outside of these relationships such as crushes, fantasies, exposure to scripts and schemas (Collins et al., 2009), and (I argue) ARPAs. I assert that these parasocial attachments, along with individual factors and interpersonal romantic relationships and experiences, shape adolescent romantic development and may contribute to long-term relationship satisfaction,

emotional wellbeing, and other developmentally relevant outcomes. As illustrated by Figure I.4, I propose that both ARPAs and reciprocal romantic relationships with people who are not media figures arise out of adolescents' sociocultural contexts and lived experiences (e.g. family, peers, media exposure) and may influence one another and future romantic relational outcomes.

This dissertation explores the lived experiences of romantic attachments to media figures in adolescence and provides preliminary evidence for the potential influence of these relationships on romantic socialization.

### **Overview of Dissertation Chapters**

For the remainder of this dissertation, I will further develop and empirically test the theoretical model of Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment, working toward three inter-related goals:

1. Present rich qualitative data that informed the construction of the theoretical model and examine young women's lived experiences of ARPA.
2. Develop a quantitative measurement of this psychological construct.
3. Determine what functions these relationships serve and what effects they might have.

Using evidence from three studies, I argue for the prevalence and power of Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachments in psychosocial development.

Chapter II will describe the findings from a series of in-depth focus groups with college women who experienced romantic parasocial attachment in adolescence. These qualitative data examine Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachments from two angles. First, I discuss participant understandings of the practices and processes involved in ARPAs in order to develop a sense of the dimensions of these relationships and to understand the lived experiences of these women. Participants in this study were highly media literate and reported a variety of emotions, cognitions, fantasies, and behaviors associated with their ARPAs. Second, I examine the reported

gratifications of these experiences and argue that participants engage in ARPAs as a means of self-socialization into adolescence. Specifically, I discuss participants' reported uses and gratifications relating to social capital, identity development, and romantic socialization.

Chapter III outlines the creation of the quantitative Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment scale. Combining the focus group findings with relevant theory, I developed a series of novel scale items, which I then refined through the analysis of data from a cross-sectional survey of undergraduate students. A final 10-item scale is proposed and statistically tested for reliability and validity. The merits of this scale, and also its potential weaknesses, are discussed.

Finally, Chapter IV reports the results of a survey of undergraduate women at the University of Michigan, examining the relation between ARPAs (as measured by the newly developed scale) and concepts related to romantic socialization. This study takes a neutral stance on the valence of these experiences, allowing for the possibilities of both adaptive and maladaptive outcomes. Specifically, participants are asked to report on their recalled ARPA experiences and respond to scales measuring their current relationship satisfaction, beliefs about gender roles in relationships, self-esteem, and experience with passionate feelings. Findings suggest that media idolization experiences are associated with predominantly negative outcomes including increased negative self-evaluation of sexual experience, higher reliance on relationship status in defining self-esteem, and increased endorsement of traditional gender norms in romantic relationships. However, the possibility of adaptive uses is not entirely ruled out. These findings are discussed and future directions are suggested.

In the concluding chapter, I summarize the findings of the three studies and discuss the implications of this work for research on parasocial relationships, adolescent development, and mass media and sexual socialization. I discuss the contributions of this work to the field while

acknowledging its weaknesses. Ultimately, I argue that this dissertation sets the stage for robust future research on the topic of Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachments and propose several directions for further study.

### **A Note on Sample Selection: Why Study Girls in Emerging Adulthood?**

Although it is likely that the experience of Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment is not limited to heterosexual American women, evidence in past work suggests that these experiences are more prevalent in this population (Boon & Lomore, 2001; Cohen, 2004). Additionally, adolescent girls often report experiencing parasocial relationships more intensely than their male peers (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990; Klimmt et al., 2006; Theran et al., 2010). As discussed above, young women are socialized into these relationships with media figures through norms of romantic attachment and a focus on relationships and interpersonal attachment norms.

Beyond issues of prevalence, industry targeting of celebrity idols for romantic attachment is largely focused on the audience of adolescent girls and women. To young men, action stars (generally men) are often marketed as role models and famous women are marketed as sex objects. In contrast, to young women, men are intentionally marketed as ideal boyfriends, partners, and husbands (rather than mere sexual objects) and the importance of these romantic relationships is emphasized (Aubrey, Walus, and Click, 2010). Celebrity women are models for appearance, designed to show young girls how to be desirable for their potential (male) partners. So, as men are taught to want to be like action stars, girls are taught to want to be *with* them (and how they should look to achieve this goal). Although, at the surface, this seems to just be another reinforcement of heteronormativity (same sex for emulation, opposite sex as sexual partners), in fact, the targets of wishful identification provide very different messages to each gender. These

differing messages from the industry suggest to teen boys that they should be defined by their achievements and how sexy their partner is and to teen girls that they should find a good boyfriend, even at the expense of their own achievement (J. D. Brown et al., 1993; also for a media example, see the *Twilight* series<sup>1</sup>). This message reinforces stereotypes of women as passive partners to strong, active men. The power differentials encouraged in this messaging make studying women especially significant. The intensity of these messages, combined with developmental factors, in early adulthood makes reflection on ARPA at the time of the attachment difficult. Using a sample of emerging adults allows participants to speak from some distance, minimizing social desirability issues associated with fandom (Jenkins, 1992) and capitalizing on their more advanced development and ability to reflect on their experiences.

Finally, it is theorized that one of the main adaptive purposes of romantic attachment to celebrities in adolescence is minimization of emotional and physical risk (Karniol, 2001). As women are taught to be especially vigilant about these risks, celebrity relationships may be especially salient. This salience may extend to other groups who perceive high emotional and social risks in romantic encounters, such as queer teens. Although beyond the scope of this project, this possibility should be addressed in future research.

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<sup>1</sup> In the *Twilight* series of books, Bella, the female lead, gives up her home, her family, her independence and ultimately, her life, for her boyfriend, allowing him to dictate her life choices, including her decision to apply to a college near him rather than to a more prestigious institution.

## CHAPTER II

### **When I Fall in Love: Focus Groups Discuss the Experience, Uses, and Gratifications of Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachments**

The goal of the first empirical study of this dissertation, a series of focus groups with college women, is to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences of, and reflections on, their parasocial romantic attachments in adolescence through an exploration of their lived experiences. When engaged in research involving marginalized groups, such as young women, researchers have a responsibility to provide a space for their participants to describe and reflect on their experiences. Larger social and cultural forces often silence the interests, emotions, and experiences of young women, and any research on this (or any marginalized group) should seek to break that silence. By examining how these young women position and understand these experiences in their romantic and identity development, we can begin to see possible long- and short-term implications of these media-based romantic relationships. This study provides an overview of participants' recalled initiation into, experience of, and outcomes from Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachments, offering support for the previously proposed ARPA model and documentation of the experiences of these participants.

#### **Adolescent Development of Romantic Relationships**

As discussed in Chapter I, adolescence is a time of great change; identity development is a central goal in this process. Adolescent identity development includes cultivation of identities related to sex, gender, career, political ideology, moral or religious identity, and social identity (Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Hoffner, Levine, & Toohey, 2008). One of the most complex aspects

of identity development and transitioning into adolescence is the navigation of romantic relationships (Shulman & Seiffe-Krenke, 2001). Prior to adolescence, romantic identity is not a major part of children's day-to-day lives and adolescents begin this form of identity development with almost no personal experience with romantic relationships (Furman & Simon, 1999). Before initiating relationships, adolescents often practice with crushes and romantic ideation (Furman & Simon, 1999).

Initial attraction to romantic partners and entry into the realm of romantic experiences generally begins in early middle school (ages 10-12) and proceeds along a general trajectory from a more individual and peer focus to a later dyad and commitment focus (B.B. Brown, 1999). With only 25% of young adolescents reporting romantic relationship experiences by age 12, young adolescents must turn to various socializing agents in order to gain the information and experience necessary to enter the dating world. Young adolescents must leverage their early experiences with models of romance (including parental relationships, siblings, peers, and cultural models) to develop appropriate and accurate scripts, schemas, beliefs, and behaviors for romantic relationships (Furman & Simon, 1999). Media are an especially salient development agent in this arena (Ward, 2003).

### **Media and Romantic Socialization**

Adolescents spend more time with media than they do at school, with family and friends, or sleeping, making it an especially powerful agent of sexual and romantic socialization (Common Sense Media, 2015). Adolescents and young adults consistently list media as one of their top three sources of information on sexual and romantic relationships (Ward, 2003). J.D. Brown, Halpern, and L'Engle (2005) have argued that media, because of their ubiquity and popularity among peer groups, may serve as powerful super-peers to adolescents. Further, because media

use is self-selected rather than determined by others, the influences of media may be especially important and powerful in adolescent socialization (Arnett, 1995; Ward, Seabrook, Manago, & Reed, 2016).

Many of the media effects models employed to examine sexual socialization, such as Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2002), focus primarily on media content and how teens absorb the messages of the media. These approaches acknowledge the agency of audiences but active engagement or strategic use on the part of adolescent viewers has only recently become a topic of interest among media effects scholars (Valkenburg, Peter, & Walther, 2016). Following this trend in the field, I argue that relationships (with media figures or otherwise) require active engagement. In using media as a tool of self-socialization and engaging with media figures in a similar manner to peers or crushes, adolescents are active in their media use. Thus, in terms of theory and methods, we must take an active audience approach to examining their media engagement.

### **The Uses and Gratifications of Parasocial Relationships**

The uses and gratifications approach to communication research argues that media users are active participants in media choice, engagement, and outcomes (Rubin, 2009). Largely developed in the 1970s, uses and gratifications theorists maintain that the effects of media on viewers cannot be understood outside of the viewers' media choices and involvement (Fisher, 1978). There are several common uses and gratifications cited in media literature. Although terms vary, for the most part, media appear largely to be used for managing mood, understanding the self and identity, understanding society, and strengthening social ties (Katz, Gurevitch, & Haas, 1973; Lull, 1980). Perceived relationships with media figures—also known as parasocial relationships—may also be considered a “use” of media, with gratifications associated with

identity, social status, mood management, and understanding society (Giles, 2002). In the transition to romantic relationships, adolescents may use parasocial relationships as a tool to experiment and explore their emotions and identity (Karniol, 2001).

When it comes to romantic development, adolescents may use romantic parasocial attachments as a safe self-socialization agent for a variety of developmental tasks, including explorations of sexuality, romance, and identity (Karniol, 2001). Dating in adolescence involves high social risk, particularly related to self-concepts and status within peer groups (B. B. Brown, 1999). Teens are particularly sensitive to risk and rejection due to their heightened need for ontological security and social affinity (Cohen & Perse, 2003). Thus, the perceived safety of parasocial relationships is especially valuable for adolescents seeking information and social cues as they enter the dating world (Conley, 2011). Romantic parasocial attachments can teach adolescents what relationships look like, how to act in a relationship, what to expect from partners, and who is an appropriate target of affection. Mediated relationships can allow teens to safely begin to explore romance and sexuality without risking themselves, their hearts, or their social standing (J. D. Brown et al., 1993; Engle & Kasser, 2005; Karniol, 2001).

Romantic parasocial attachments may also provide a space for identity development. According to Spitzberg and Cupach (2008), “Through processes of fantasized interactions and scenarios, adolescents get to imaginatively construct not only ways of behaving, but features of identity and identification” (p. 289). These fantasized interactions can be explored through engagement with media narratives and may ease the transition toward adult relationships and healthy identity development (Theran et al., 2010). Additionally, scholars have suggested that romantic parasocial attachments may facilitate contemporary peer relationships by providing a source of conversation for friend groups and a perceived point of consensus or expression of

closeness; indeed, these attachments likely have implications for multiple other areas of psychosocial development (Karniol, 2001). However, many of the theorized assertions have not been empirically tested. More empirical work testing these theories and providing a space for adolescent experiences to be shared and analyzed is required. This study approaches romantic parasocial relationships in adolescents as active, agentic relationships and the uses of gratifications of these relationships among adolescents are explored.

### **The Current Study**

In this chapter, I will present research that takes a comprehensive approach to the study of teen romantic attachment to celebrities, focusing on developmental processes that may influence and motivate these fan-media figure relationships, and providing a space for audiences to speak to their own experiences. Using a series of in-depth focus groups with young women, this study aims to provide answers to the following research questions:

R1: How do emerging adults recall experiencing and understanding romantic parasocial attachments in adolescence?

R2: What are the uses and gratifications of romantic parasocial relationships in adolescence?

R3: How do romantic parasocial relationships relate (or not relate) to the development of adolescent romantic scripts and schemas, and identity development?

Giles (2002) has argued that parasocial relationship research of all types needs to extend beyond traditional quantitative approaches to incorporate a qualitative and ethnographic perspective, allowing audiences to speak to their own experiences and adding nuance and depth to research findings. This study aims to contribute to this expansion of the field of inquiry through a series of in-depth focus groups analyzed using grounded theory and qualitative content analysis.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Participants in this study were female undergraduate students at a large Midwestern university. Participants were recruited from an introductory level Communications course and received 30 minutes of required research participation credit for completing a pre-survey and 1.5 hours of research participation credit for attending a focus group. In order to participate in the study, participants must have reported experiencing a romantic attachment or attraction to a media figure when they were young adolescents, ages 10-14, on a general pre-screening survey. The population of college students was selected because younger adolescents may not be able to thoughtfully reflect on their experiences in the same way as emerging adults. These participants are able to look back at their experiences with some distance and draw conclusions about both why they believe that they felt these attachments and how the attachments were of use to them.

One hundred fifty-four women responded to a pre-screening survey addressing their experiences with romantic parasocial relationships. Of these, 47 (approximately 30%) expressed interest in participating in an in-person focus group. Unfortunately, many students were unable to attend the scheduled focus groups (despite previously reported availability), or did not respond to the email request for focus group participation. Ultimately, 18 students participated in 6 in-person semi-structured focus groups (11.6% of those who took the prescreening survey; 38% of those who indicated interest in the focus groups). The students ranged in age from 17 to 20 years old and were predominantly Caucasian American. There were five international participants, four from Korea and one from Eastern Europe.

## **Procedure**

Prior to the focus groups, participants completed an online survey inquiring about their experiences with romantic attachments to media figures in adolescence. The survey asked participants to identify the media figure to whom they were most strongly attached in adolescence and to describe their feelings for that figure at the time of the attachment. The survey also asked participants to describe the emotions, cognitions, and behaviors associated with their attachment to this media figure. Finally, participants were provided with the opportunity to participate in a focus group on this topic. If they indicated interest, they were then required to provide some information about their schedule and availability and were told that the researcher would follow up with them shortly.

Based on availability indicated in the prescreen survey, participants were asked to attend a scheduled focus group. Participants who volunteered to take part in the focus groups were placed in clusters of 4-6 women. Because fandom is often a social experience, particularly in adolescence (see Giles, 2000; Jenkins, 1992; Karniol, 2001), I chose a focus group methodology to increase participant comfort in discussing their fandom with the primary investigator. The hope was that discussing parasocial romantic relationships with a group of peers who had similar experiences could increase the depth of the conversation and minimize any discomfort with the topic. Grouping was based on similarities in reported participant experiences such as: age at parasocial romantic relationship initiation, cognitions, behaviors, and emotions. This method maximized the comfort of the participants through homogeneity without eliminating all heterogeneity. The final group sizes varied from two to five participants. Ideally, 4-6 participants would have allowed for maximum depth of data and comfort for participants (Morgan, 1997);

nonetheless, the average group size of three still provided a safe and productive space for discussion.

Upon arrival at the focus group (held in a neutral, private, on-campus space), participants were handed a copy of their pre-screen survey responses for reference during the discussion. Participants were asked to reflect on their answers to the survey questions before the focus group began. The researcher then facilitated a semi-structured discussion of several topics related to romantic parasocial relationships. For the purposes of this study, I focus on the discussion of the experiences (including emotions, cognitions, fantasies, and behaviors), perceived uses and gratifications of romantic parasocial attachments in adolescence, and the perceived long-term role of the relationships in participants' romantic lives and overall wellbeing. The questions were designed to integrate previously established characteristics of parasocial relationships and parasocial romance (Tukachinsky, 2010) with the tasks of sexual and romantic development while leaving sufficient space for new constructs to emerge.

The focus groups lasted approximately 90 minutes and were recorded using audio and video recorders. At least one same-sex (woman) research assistant attended each focus group to take notes on participant responses, body language, and other behaviors or statements of note. After the group discussion, participants were asked to provide any final thoughts or comments that they did not share earlier, either in writing (if they preferred confidentiality from the group) or aloud. A few participants stated final comments but no one turned in confidential content. A full list of questions used to guide the semi-structured focus groups is available in Appendix A.

Three undergraduate research assistants (all women) transcribed the focus groups and their transcriptions were checked for accuracy by the primary investigator.

## **Analysis**

Analysis of the transcribed focus groups included engagement with both extant theory and empirical data. This approach was built upon the practices of grounded theory—a methodological technique in which data collection and analysis are simultaneous and both inform and are informed by theory (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007)—and qualitative content analysis. Grounded theory based analyses of the data revealed emergent themes. Qualitative content analysis was then used to verify associations between the emergent themes of the data and the theoretical concepts that may describe the data, as interpreted by the researcher (Steever, 2009). Ultimately, the goal of this analysis was to identify key emergent themes in the data and then to put these themes in dialogue with relevant theoretical constructs related to parasocial relationships and audience research, uses and gratifications theory, and adolescent psychosocial development.

## **Results**

Participant data from the focus groups were organized into clusters according to stages of romantic parasocial relationships that emerged from the discussions. These stages included relationship initiation (including comments related to attraction, first impressions, and introduction to the media figure), the practices occurring during the relationship (emotions, cognitions, behaviors, and fantasies), and reflections on the role of these relationships in participants' lives (uses and gratifications, effects on romantic socialization). Results will be provided according to these stages.

Before discussing the initiation stage of ARPAs, I want to highlight that participants in this study were students in a communications course and thus fairly media literate (at the time of the focus groups). For the most part, as emerging adults, participants were very savvy about the

constructed nature of media personae. They acknowledged the “work” of performing celebrity and the role of the industry in promoting the targets of their crushes. For example, one participant explained that media figures are “manipulated to their best sides or their funny sides.” Another participant reflected on the need for celebrities to develop an illusion of authenticity, particularly through their social media accounts.

“If they weren’t packaging themselves like everyone else did that would probably be kind of a risky business move you know. Like, their originality does have its place ...[but] everybody knows that having someone to manage Justin Timberlake’s Twitter, Instagram, Facebook accounts makes him famous.”

For this participant, although she followed Justin Timberlake’s social media accounts and described them as increasing the star’s accessibility and authenticity, her current knowledge of celebrity image management and the media industry presented a point of tension and colored her interpretation of her own experiences. These reflections seem to be based on an understanding of parasocial romantic relationships as part of an earlier, perhaps more naïve, moment in her development.

“Someone who's younger might not have as much experience and you sort of, like, look at it as like, I don't know. You idealize it more whereas when you get older, you sort of think about it more practically and analyze it more critically.”

For this participant, current parasocial relationships (romantic or otherwise) were associated with a more sophisticated understanding of the media industry and of herself than she attributes to her younger self. This lens of maturation and media literacy, through which participants recalled and assessed their experiences, was evident throughout the focus group discussions.

### **Relationship Initiation**

The initiation of parasocial romantic attachments, for the young women in the focus groups, was driven by physical appearance. The vast majority of participants reported physical attraction

as the primary reason for initiating the parasocial relationship. For participants who initiated their romantic parasocial attachments early (between ages 10-13), most of the celebrities described, such as Justin Bieber, Hunter Hayes, and the members of the band One Direction, lacked traditionally masculine handsomeness but rather evince a more feminine “cuteness.” This attraction to feminized celebrities aligns with other research on parasocial relationships, which demonstrates that initial attraction to media figures in adolescence is less about sexual attraction than about idealized romantic attraction to non-threatening media figures (Karniol, 2001). Several participants described their crushes as “like Prince Charming,” reflecting this romantic idealism.

Participants were also attracted to media figures that they perceived as authentic and similar to themselves. One participant described the sense of destiny she associated with her attraction to Nick Jonas:

“My favorite things in the whole world are musical theater like Broadway and baseball and he was just like Nick Jonas first of all but then he did musical theater and it was actually my favorite musical and also, he loves baseball and they always played softball before their concerts.”

As it is in interpersonal romantic relationships (Acitelli, Kenny, & Weiner, 2001; Amodio & Showers, 2005), perceived similarity is important to initial attraction to a parasocial partner. This participant saw not only a celebrity who embodied her physical ideal at that time in her development, but also a celebrity with whom she could relate and share interests.

A notable absence from discussions of relationship initiation within the focus groups was the perceived talent of the media figures. Participants did reference how talented their crushes were, but only as a reflection made after early attraction and initiation of the relationship.

## Relationship Practices

In recalling the practices associated with their romantic parasocial attachments in adolescence, participant descriptions of their experiences fell into four categories: behaviors, emotions, cognitions, and fantasies.

**Behaviors.** Behaviors associated with Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachments were varied. Many of the behaviors described by participants aligned with the findings from broader research on fandom including collecting, the accumulation of knowledge, and textual production (Duffett, 2013). However, additional behaviors were unique, or particularly salient, to the adolescent romantic attachment experience. For example, many participants described the importance of physical reminders of their crushes in the form of posters, pictures, and other images as central to their day-to-day experiences with romantic parasocial attachments.

“[Justin Bieber] was on the front page of *People* so I bought that and, like, stared at the pictures.”

Planned, in-person interactions and the pursuit of these interactions (via attendance at concerts, radio events, sporting events, and even visits to restaurants or coffee shops that a celebrity was known to visit) were another frequently reported form of behavior. However, there were also many participants who described their fandom as restricted by geography or finances or limited to a largely internal experience with few associated behaviors. In response to an East Coast participant’s description of attending concerts and events in New York City, one participant from central Michigan responded:

“I lived in a really small town. We had to drive probably like an hour to get to a big city where they had concerts. I went to a Jonas Brothers concert once...but it was kind of a drive...I never tried to meet the person I had a crush on. I always thought about it though.”

For this participant, her geographic location limited her ability to engage in behaviors such as arranging in-person sightings or attending concerts, despite her desire to engage in those activities. Another participant described the personal nature of her parasocial attachment:

“It was like my first crush...it was so awkward, it wasn’t even a person that I could actually talk to ...it was all just in my head.”

The experiences of these participants reflect the structural and personal explanations for the great disparity in reported behaviors across the focus group respondents.

**Emotions.** The primary emotions associated with ARPAs were excitement and joy. Participants enjoyed their parasocial romances and were excited to engage with their crushes via media content. They expressed even more excitement at the possibility or memory of reciprocal interactions with the celebrities. At a Jason Derulo concert, one of the participants made eye contact with the star:

“He looked at me and I literally almost fainted.”

Other participants nodded in agreement with the excitement expressed in this statement.

Participants also reported more complex emotional engagement with the media figures. The women felt empathy with their crushes and reacted to negative events in his life with concern and sorrow. Describing the break-up of her favorite K-pop band, one participant said,

“I was really upset when the boy band split up. I was really upset. I was literally, like, crying when I heard the news.”

She went on to explain that her distress was the result of imagining what her favorite band member (the celebrity with whom she had a romantic parasocial attachment) might be feeling at that moment. This exemplifies the pattern of participants who reported worrying about the media figures when they were sick or injured, celebrating their successes, and mourning their failures.

**Cognitions.** Cognitions associated with ARPAs primarily fell within two categories. First, participants related evaluating their celebrities' actual romantic partners and his other fans. The women wanted to be "good enough" for their media figure and sought out points of comparison between themselves and the women with whom he had a relationship. Discussing her adolescent romantic parasocial relationship with Robert Pattinson, from *Twilight*, one participant explained the source of a negative self-evaluation of her appearance.

"I've always envied [Kristen Stewart]'s body...I thought I could be closer to being good enough for him if I had skinny legs [like her]."

Another participant reported positive self-evaluations when comparing her own fandom to other fans of Justin Timberlake.

"I am less fan-girly and more appreciative of his artistry."

For these women, time spent thinking about their crush was also time spent reflecting on their own social position and status.

The second major category of cognitions involved idealization of the media figures. Participants engaged in regular consideration on the many merits of their crush. Analyzing her thoughts about her favorite member of TVXQ, a popular (now defunct) K-pop band, one young woman described her thought processes.

"When you are really addicted, you're just like, 'Everything about him is perfect.'"

Many of the women reported similar idealizations and cognitions.

**Fantasy.** Finally, beyond the traditional categories associated with parasocial relationships, participants in this study described their experiences as involving high levels of fantasizing. They doodled the celebrities' names in their notebooks and imagined conversations with him if they met in person:

“I remember having to go to class in 8<sup>th</sup> grade and like, ugh, I have to go to class, so boring but like thank god I get to just like think about what I’m going to say to Nick Jonas... if I ever meet him.”

Several participants pictured fairytale weddings:

“When I was younger I thought: aw, I [want to] marry Ben Barnes and have beautiful babies and get married and have a huge wedding.”

One participant described a fantasy about her crush invading her dreams:

“I did have a dream once where he came to my door with a bouquet of roses and asked me on a date.”

Fantasies such as this one were prevalent throughout the focus group conversations, suggesting that the practice of fantasizing about media figures was an essential part of the ARPA experience.

### **Reflections on Uses and Gratifications and Effects**

Beyond remembering their experiences with parasocial romance in adolescence, participants in the focus groups also discussed the ways in which they believe that these relationships affected (or did not affect) their lives.

In-depth analysis of the focus group transcripts revealed five key emergent themes related to participants’ uses for and gratifications from parasocial romantic relationships in adolescence. The first of these themes focuses on the perception of parasocial romantic relationships as fun and diverting. The remaining four themes each relate to various aspects of identity development in adolescence: identity development and consolidation, fulfillment of instrumental goals, social relationship development, and romantic self-socialization.

**Diversion.** Participants consistently reported that their Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachments were a source of fun, diversion, or distraction. This perspective lines up with previous research suggesting that enjoyment is a major motivating factor in media viewing

(Rubin, 2009). Participants turned to these relationships as a way to relax after a long day at school or to escape their surroundings for a time. One participant reflected,

“I mean for me when I see a celebrity that I really like or a concert that I really enjoy it makes me really happy.”

In this quote, the participant is categorizing her enjoyment of celebrity attachments as a kind of mood management (Zillmann, 1988). Although not the sole purpose of her experience, this participant used celebrity exposure in order to positively influence her overall mood.

Along a similar vein, another participant remarked,

“It’s kind of a way to relieve the stress. Yeah, like I’m obsessing over this one actor and he’s like showing up in this drama right now and the drama is on right now on Wednesday and Thursday so I’m always waiting for Wednesdays. The whole week’s been really hard, like a whole week has a paper [due], but on Wednesday I’m like ‘oh yeah this is a time to relieve my stress I just want to focus on him,’ you know, so that kind of like just happens and like relieves the stress.”

For this participant, a fan of actor Ben Barnes, her attachment acted simultaneously as a motivator (as another participant explained, “something to look forward to,”) and as a source of stress relief. Fandom was, and continues to be, a fun and enjoyable pastime for these young women.

**Identity-based uses and gratifications.** Adolescence is a pivotal time in social development for children as they begin to explore, test, and determine their adult identities (Furman, Simon, Shaffer, & Bouchee, 2002; Greene & Adams-Price, 1990). The remaining uses and gratifications that emerged from the focus groups each address a different aspect of identity development and exploration in adolescence.

***Identity development and consolidation.*** Many participants reported using media as a means to explore and define their own identities both independently and in relation to others. On an individual level, participants described their parasocial romantic relationships as a means of

looking inward and exploring their own identity, including the aspects of their persona they want to highlight and their emotional development. One young woman described using her crush on Justin Bieber as a way to express her identity,

“I guess it was a way that I [could] like express myself just because I was able to buy all of the music, decorate my room, decorate my notebooks.”

She surrounded herself with reminders of her attachment as a part of her understanding and expression of her identity. Another participant described a similar experience of identity exploration, this time with a focus on emotion,

“I think it had to do with trying to feel more angst-y than I was. I think I tried to identify with Billy Joe Armstrong in a sense that he was very anti-establishment and like, ‘my life is so hard’.”

Dealing with the frustrations of the transition to adolescence, this participant turned to Green Day lead singer Billy Joe Armstrong and his music to understand her own experiences. At an emotionally fraught developmental moment, attachments to media figures were a safe testing ground for her to understand and express emotion.

Participants also described using the performance of fandom as a means of distinguishing themselves from their peers and building their self-esteem and social position. Participants expressed their status within a group through claims of early discovery—being “in the know” about the artist before others discovered him—and through legitimization of their own fandom as separate from superficial fans only interested in appearance. One participant, a fan of singer Hunter Hayes, explained,

"I knew about him before he got famous and stuff.”

In this quotation, similar to the earlier participant who distanced her self from “fan-girls,” she claims a level of distinction among Hunter Hayes’ fans that results from her early discovery of his work. She perceives herself as a more legitimate or genuine fan—thus building her self-

esteem and solidifying her understanding of her own identity. Another participant expressed her status as an authentic, serious fan by comparing herself to other fans of the same media figure:

"I'm never actually going to meet [Justin Timberlake] and if I did I wouldn't be like drooling because enough people drool over him anyway...that wouldn't set me apart from anybody else, I'd probably be like, FYI, I love you, we can hug if you want."

This participant imagines herself playing it cool with her crush if she met him in real life—demonstrating that she is not just another “fan-girl.”

***Fulfillment of instrumental goals.*** In addition to general identity exploration and development, many participants expressed more directed and utilitarian uses and gratifications of their celebrity attachments. These gratifications were not always anticipated but are now perceived as a key use of the relationship. One international participant described improving her mastery of English through her relationship with Robert Pattinson,

“I would just record his interviews on my phone, iPhone and I would listen to them all night in my headphones... but it actually helped me learn English because I’ve never had an academic English education before so I, I was exposed to a very different level of English when I was just like researching about him I guess.”

This participant, perhaps anticipating her future undergraduate study in the US, used her attachment to Robert Pattinson as a motivator and a tool to prepare her to succeed in her future identity as a multi-lingual international student.

Other participants were more strategic in their instrumental uses of romantic parasocial attachments. One participant described using her attachment to Jason Derulo as a means to understand the music industry and “figure out the system.” Eventually, using knowledge gained from her crush on Derulo, she made contact with Derulo’s manager, transforming her parasocial romantic relationship into a source of opportunity for her future career. Discussing her parents’ reaction to her attachment to Derulo, she says,

“Now especially, they are supportive because, well, I have met him a couple of times now and, I have his manager’s like contact information, and since I want to go into the entertainment industry they would kind of want me to go [to concerts] because it is a great networking opportunity.”

Although the instrumental goal of gaining contacts and connections in the entertainment industry did not drive her initial attraction to Jason Derulo, this young woman was very strategic in her approach to the parasocial relationship and used it as a means to get a foot in the door of a difficult industry and to explore her possible future as a performer. The parasocial relationship allowed exploration and development of a possible occupational identity.

***Social relationship development.*** Identity does not only exist within a person but also as a social construction based on connections to others (Annese, 2004). A third way in which participants used their romantic attachments to opposite sex celebrities was as a productive means of maintaining and generating social ties and performing their membership within specific communities. One participant described making new friends through shared parasocial romantic relationships,

“One of my best friends, I made in 8th grade because she loved Joe Jonas and I loved Nick Jonas...she was not even in my [regular] group of friends.”

This young woman’s attachment to Nick Jonas resulted in new and lasting social ties.

Additionally, it allowed her to expand her social community beyond her immediate clique and claim membership in the Jonas Brothers’ fan community.

Shared fandom was also an important means of maintaining social relationships. One participant described her experience at a friend’s birthday party,

“I had a good friend who, she was like my best friend in this phase. I don't know if she liked Elvis because I liked Elvis or what it was, but she had a birthday party and had an Elvis impersonator come [to the party].”

This friendship between two girls was strengthened through their shared fandom for Elvis. There were many other examples of social bonding over fandom in the focus groups. Participants described going to concerts or events with friends, planning attempts to meet or interact with the media figures in person, and, most commonly, discussing the objects of their affection.

The discussion of fan objects was central to these attachments and exemplified the practice of meaning making within social communities. However, this discussion was not always harmonious. Some of their bonding was done over disagreements on celebrity crushes.

“For me it was a boy band and I liked this specific guy and my friends liked the other [guy]. So, then we would always talk about who’s better and stuff.”

Although these friends did follow the same K-pop boy band, TVXQ, their specific crushes were on separate band members and their social connections were strengthened through the discussion of this disagreement. Additionally, this form of bonding over disagreements also occurred in the focus groups themselves. For one group, a debate over whether or not Chuck Bass, a character on the CW Network’s *Gossip Girl* (CWTV, 2007-2012), was a worthy target of affection sparked the active participation of many of the participants and resulted in a more open and animated discussion overall. The shared experience of adolescent romantic parasocial attachment to media figures strengthened participants’ comfort and intimacy with each other, despite the disparate targets of their affection.

***Romantic socialization.*** Finally, participants also described using these relationships to understand romantic relationships and experiment with romantic identity. Participants practiced intimacy through spending time with the object of their affection (watching YouTube videos, looking at pictures, imagining interactions) and enjoying feeling the emotions that came with that intimacy. By imagining and fantasizing about a relationship with a media figure, teens could assess and understand their feelings and emotions related to romance (Engle & Kasser, 2005).

They were also explicit about the safety of this practice. One participant reflected on parasocial romances in adolescence,

“They’re fine and they’re just, like, kind of lighthearted. You have to invest in a relationship but, you don’t really have to invest in this cause...nothing’s [going to] happen either way. So I can just be obsessed with you but, at the end of the day, in my mind you still love me no matter what.”

The low stakes expressed in the final portion of this quotation echo the descriptions of other participants’ understandings of these relationships as a safe means of romantic socialization with limited potential for negative outcomes—emotional or otherwise. This finding coincides with previous research, which argued that these relationships provide a safe space for exploration of romantic and sexual identity (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990; Karniol, 2001).

Participants also described these relationships as helping them to establish their “type”—or their partner preferences—and with providing them with scripts and schemas around romantic relationships. Describing what she learned from her parasocial romantic relationship, one participant explains,

“When we are dating in the future, with my real boyfriend, I should be like that and the girl do like this and the guys will like it.”

Her romantic relationship with a media figure taught her how to behave and what to expect in romantic relationships in the future.

**Effects.** In general, participants alternately minimized the emotional significance of their relationships with media figures and distanced their current selves from the relationships or took pains to justify these relationships, resulting in a degree of ambivalence surrounding the recalled relationship. As college students reflecting on these relationships, members of one focus group agreed with a participant who said,

“When you’re actually trying to form actual relationships and to be obsessed with someone is like...kind of sad.”

One participant shared her experience of deciding whether or not to attend an event where her crush would appear.

"He was at an event at Target and I almost went but it was for charity. I was like 'I should probably go for charity reasons, not for this' but I was very close to going to see him."

At the same time, sometimes within a few minutes, participants also described continued romantic parasocial attachments in the present,

"I saw [Jason Derulo's] concert this summer and so like my love for him will just like never die, he was so good, I have the t-shirt and the whole shebang."

These seemingly contradictory statements—one of distancing from romantic feelings and motivations and one of embracing those same feelings—demonstrate both the value of these relationships to the individuals and a degree of embarrassment, perhaps reflective of perceived judgment from society at large. In response to a question about celebrity social media use, one participant was explicit about her efforts to hide her crush to avoid embarrassment:

"I don't use Twitter. I just would...Google "Justin Bieber twitter" and just look that up. And then I'd erase the history...I was under this fear that my sister would use my computer and then she'd be like, Why would Justin Bieber's Twitter be up there?"

Other participants described broader negative attitudes towards fans:

"Emotional negatives...So, a lot of times fans get sort of like made fun of or like belittled."

There were also participants who acknowledged the influence of these relationships on their lives and were willing to share their thoughts with the group. Regarding the effects of her romantic parasocial relationships on partner preferences, one participant said,

"I feel like it ruined me. I was very hesitant to get in any relationship in middle school and high school because I was like, 'You're not Nick Jonas, I can't date you...what if I see him tomorrow?' When I finally did have a boyfriend at the end of high school, I was, like, completely unprepared."

Other participants also describe the hunt for an ideal partner to match their fantasized celebrity attachment, albeit with less intensity:

“I thought all of the boys in my school were really ugly because I, I was like “oh, there aren’t any cute guys in our school” because I would like watch the guys on this TV show and be like, oh, they are way cuter. I thought they made everyone else worse looking...which sucked.”

Generally, most participants saw their ARPAs as fun experiences, shared with friends, before their initiation into interpersonal romantic relationships. Only a few perceived an effect on relationship satisfaction or identity formation.

### **Discussion**

Using a developmental-contextual perspective (B. B. Brown, 1999), this research examines the common adolescent experience of romantic parasocial relationships and their perceived uses and gratifications. Focus groups with college women provide support for conceptualizing adolescent romantic parasocial attachments as formative developmental experiences. Further, these experiences are often undertaken with motivated uses and gratifications associated with navigating the changing social, biological, and cultural contexts of adolescence. Overall, the emergent themes fall into two broad categories: the use of these relationships for diversion and mood management and the use of these relationships to explore and assert identity. These themes suggest possible implications for how adolescents develop both individually and socially, within and outside of the realm of romance and sexuality.

Unsurprisingly, pleasure and enjoyment are motivations in and of themselves for fan behaviors (Harrington and Bielby, 1995). The broad category of diversion captures this pleasure motivation for parasocial romantic relationships. Participants entered into these relationships because they were fun, relieved stress, and provided a pleasurable escape. As argued by Klimmt, Hartmann, and Schramm (2006), for these participants, parasocial relationships were a

gratification of their own, aiding in mood management by promoting positive affect and acting, in many ways, similarly to interpersonal relationships.

Although diversion was a near-universal gratification of these parasocial relationships, it was not the only reason adolescents turned to media figures for romantic experiences.

Adolescence is a key moment for identity development and exploration, and adolescent identity is partly constructed through interaction with the media (Engle & Kasser, 2005). Media interactions, specifically romantic parasocial relationships, allow adolescents to define themselves as individuals within a group while simultaneously developing and maintaining social relationships. Shared experiences are especially important in adolescence (B. B. Brown, 1999; Giles, 2000), particularly for young women (Brizendine, 2006; Giles, 2000), and the shared experience of romantic parasocial attachments provides a low stakes point of entry for relationship building (Giles, 2000). Discussion of media crushes facilitates practicing social skills and fulfills adolescents' need for social affinity (Cohen & Perse, 2003; Fiering, 1996). Because of the focus on shared experiences in early adolescence, girls can have parasocial romantic relationships with the same partner as their peers. The parasocial relationship is more about social cohesion, fantasy, and learning the norms of romantic relationships as a group than about individualized romantic experiences (B. B. Brown, 1999).

In addition to building and maintaining their social communities, participants also used their attachments to media figures as a means of exploring and defining their own identities—first through the accumulation of social capital and status, and second through explicit exploration of self and emotions. As adolescents and women, the participants in this study had limited power in society at the time of their parasocial relationships. As such, many described using the performance of fandom as a means of developing popular cultural capital—a form of

social power and status—in order to distinguish themselves from their peers (Bourdieu, 1984; Fiske, 1992). Fiske (1989), building on Bourdieu's (1984) work on social capital, defines popular cultural capital as a form of capital important to status and identity. Popular cultural capital provides a means for members of groups with less social power to gain self-esteem and status within their own peer groups. The interplay between popular cultural capital and self-esteem was reflected in participants' description of their own status within fan groups as based on early, intimate, or unique knowledge of or about a media figure.

Participants also described their parasocial romantic relationships as a means of looking inward and exploring their own identity. Early adolescent romantic relationships with peers are often short and seem casual to observers (Collins et al., 2009). This appearance of triviality is likely due to the focus on the individual in early relationships – defining the self, building peer relationships, and understanding emotion—rather than on the dyadic pairing or romantic commitment (B. B. Brown, 1999; Collins et al., 2009). Attachments to media figures provided participants with an anchor for their explorations of identity and an object around which to organize their romantic experiences.

Romantic parasocial relationships allow for the projection of a fantasized idealized self and ideal mediated partner. In these relationships, fans can be their best selves and they can project their desired qualities onto celebrities based on limited information from media sources. In his ethnographic study of media fans, Caughey (1984) interviewed a woman who was a fan of Roger Daltrey of The Who, who stated,

“I began to fantasize about meeting Roger Daltrey. I'd imagine myself sitting in a bar or at a pool and seeing Roger Daltrey walk over and sit next to me. We would start small talking and I would casually mention that he was one of the members of The Who. He'd smile shyly and say, 'Yes.'” (p. 45)

The experience described in this quotation demonstrates the power and importance of fantasizing in parasocial romance. This is not a vague outline of imagined future interactions but rather a specific, precise event subjectively experienced by the fan. Fantasy interactions of this type, although exciting, are also safe, secure and controlled by the fan (Engle & Kasser, 2005). They allow both the fantasy of being in a relationship with a media figure and the possibility of a fantasy self to engage in the relationship (Caughey, 1984). In most cases, although fans may see their favorite media figure at an event or a concert, they rarely seek them out to fulfill their fantasized relationship. Instead, fans engage in pseudo-communications with the objects of their affection through talking to or kissing their posters, writing fan letters (many of which are sure to be lost in a pile of such letters), and buying merchandise related to the character or figure (Caughey, 1984). These pseudo communications fuel the parasocial romantic relationship without challenging the idealized self or other, and maintaining the fantasy. The parasocial romance remains tailored to the needs of the self.

Parasocial romantic relationships also provide a space for the cultivation of social identities beyond the romantic or social such as those of a student, devotee, professional, or ideologue. Participants used these relationships to achieve instrumental goals associated with the development of these areas of identity. Giles (2010) describes vicarious learning through media figures as evolutionarily adaptive in that it allows broad exploration of identity beyond an adolescent's immediate context.

Finally, participants reported using parasocial romantic attachments to experiment with romantic relationships prior to dating. Combined changes in biology and social contexts lead adolescents to experience wide swings of emotion (more than adults), particularly related to romantic relationships (Larson et al., 1999). Romantic relationships are risky and frightening to

many adolescents, and parasocial romantic relationships allow teens to begin to address key questions related to romantic relationships—Who will I be in a relationship? And who will my partner be?—all while remaining safe from immediate consequences, such as rejection, health risk, and peer disapproval (Greene & Adams-Price, 1990). Romantic relationships may be especially perilous for early developing adolescent women (Greene & Adams-Price, 1990), who are at higher risk for negative sexual health outcomes (Price & Hyde, 2009), and who likely receive romantic and sexual attention at a younger age than their male peers (Larson et al., 1999).

Developing an identity within relationships depends largely on the acquisition of scripts and schemas related to romantic relationships (Green & Adams-Price, 1990). Adolescents can explore their romantic views and attitudes through parasocial relationships and reject, modify, or accept possible scripts and schemas while also getting to know their own feelings and fantasies (Engle & Kasser, 2005). The identity of a future partner in a romantic relationship is often shaped by the acceptance or rejection of one's peer group (J. D. Brown et al., 2005). Peers and culture are a testing ground for both the self and the peer group to identify eligible and attractive partners (Miller & Benson, 1999). Miller and Benson (1999) include crushes on unattainable partners like movie stars, musicians, and other celebrities as one level at which partners are assessed. Adolescents may also use parasocial romantic relationships to evaluate current and future partners (Burnett & Beto, 2000). Adolescents can, “by experimenting in fantasied relationships with popular figures, ...delineate the outlines of a future partner,” (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990, p. 189).

Parasocial romantic relationships represent active attempts to navigate the rapidly shifting relationships of adolescence. The power and ubiquity of these relationships is evident in the experiences of these young women. They describe romantic parasocial attachments in

adolescence as a normal part of development, “just part of growing up,” and explain that it is something “everyone goes through.” Based on these results and research demonstrating parasocial relationships as a moderator of media effects (Cohen, 2004), parasocial romantic relationships may facilitate or amplify media effects, shape romantic and sexual development, and may also be associated with broader developmental outcomes.

In his model of romantic development toward dyadic partnership, B.B. Brown (1999) argues that researchers should attempt to examine a full range of developmental romantic orientations and experiences. Although he assumes a particular endpoint (the committed dyad) that may not apply to all adolescents or young adults, this call for robust examination of the developmental process is important and extends beyond that assumption. Based on the data presented here, parasocial romantic relationships appear to constitute a common and important form of romantic experience within the range of romantic experiences. The narratives of these women, when combined with psychological literature on adolescent sexual and romantic development, suggest that romantic attachments to media figures likely constitute an additional normal phase of romantic and sexual socialization, perhaps occurring prior to or simultaneous with B. B. Brown’s (1999) initiation stage. In fact, there may even be a developmental sequence of parasocial romantic relationships; Karniol (2001) proposes shifting objects of attachment across development for heterosexual adolescent women, which align with degree of romantic and sexual experience. Given their emotional power and potential influence, these relationships need to be addressed as consequential developmental experiences, and more work needs to be done to connect parasocial romantic relationships to the larger adolescent romantic and sexual relationship literature.

Evidence in past scholarly work suggests that strong parasocial attachments to media figures can influence interpretation of narratives (Cohen, 2002), adoption of scripts, schemas and norms (Rubin & Step, 2000), changes in attitudes and behavior (Basil, 1996; Boon & Lomore, 2001), and idealization of future relationships (Burnett & Beto, 2000). In earlier research, 58% of adolescents report that their attitudes and values were influenced by celebrity idols, and 47% perceive an influence on their lifestyle (Boon & Lomore, 2001). Depending on the nature of media portrayals and the attributes of media figures, this strong influence of media figures may have negative or positive consequences.

In this study, participants reported looking to media to see how to act and to learn what relationships might look and feel like. These findings suggest that romantic parasocial relationships in adolescence may increase the influence of media portrayals of romance, sex, and gender on viewers. Yet, participants also minimized or disputed the effects of their parasocial attachments on their lives. This contradiction can perhaps be reconciled by a consideration of the third-person effect in media theory (Andsager & White, 2007; Davison, 1983). The third-person effect refers to the common phenomenon of viewers identifying the effects of media on others while denying the existence of those effects in their own lives. This theory argues that individuals are not able to accurately or objectively reflect on or assess their own experience with media (Andsager & White, 2007). In one focus group, when asked what they had learned or taken from their parasocial romances, all participants simultaneously replied, “Nothing,” and laughed together. In another group, each participant made sure to clarify that, although she thought there might be effects, these effects would only occur for certain types of people:

“If celebrities that people, impressionable people, idolize are seen like doing bad things...I don’t know, I guess it probably makes people less inclined to like shy away from the same behavior you know.”

However, when asked whether or not they would be concerned about a younger sibling engaging in a parasocial romantic attachment and the effects it might have, nearly all participants across the focus groups replied affirmatively. Similarly, when asked about more general effects of romantic parasocial attachments, most participants were able to identify at least one possible effect, often negative, on adolescents. This recognition of or concern about effects on others while rejecting the existence of effects on the self aligns with the tenets of theories on third-person effects (Davison, 1983).

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study. First and foremost, with a limited sample of undergraduate college women, it is difficult to generalize these findings and observations to a larger population. As students at a prestigious university, the participants in this study generally held a higher socio-economic status than the majority of the population and a somewhat advanced education. Additionally, the focus group method used in this study, although allowing for rich descriptions of the experiences of the participants, cannot provide information on the scope of these relationships or their effects in the broader population. For example, norms associated with fan attachments might be different across different socio-economic groups, perhaps reflecting differences in media consumption and also judgments about the worthiness of fandom as a pursuit. In this sample, participant race and social class were relatively homogenous and, as a result, I was not able to explore these factors further. In future work, it will be necessary to examine these relationships quantitatively with diverse adolescent samples in order to understand the experiences and effects of these parasocial attachments more clearly.

Additionally, at the time of the focus groups, the participants were in their freshmen and sophomore years of college and were asked to reflect upon their experiences as young teens and

adolescents. There is a limit to self-reflection regardless of whether or not it is retrospective. Although it would be beneficial to hear directly from teens about their experiences as they are occurring, admitting to celebrity crushes and talking in-depth about those crushes may be seen as risky by participants. Given the way that fandom is depicted in the media, admitting to an emotional relationship with a media figure can have negative connotations, and teens may perceive possible negative social and emotional consequences (Jenkins, 1992). Indeed, participants here demonstrated their understanding of the negative perceptions of fandom through distancing and justification of their relationships.

Beyond social desirability issues, criticisms of retrospective self-reports question the limitations of memory; however, there is evidence to suggest that adults' recollections of their childhood experiences, particularly unique or consequential experiences, tend to be fairly accurate (Brewin, Andrews, & Gotlib, 1993). This is particularly true when the reports are based on confirming events rather than negating them—as when confirming or explaining the experience of adolescent crushes (Brewin et al., 1993).

As discussed above, the phenomenon of adolescent romantic parasocial attachments to media figures is a common part of sexual and romantic socialization for many American teens. Attachment to celebrities allows teens to safely experiment with identity building through mediated, controlled relationships that present limited emotional threats. However, very little research has been done examining teen romantic attachment to celebrities, and, in the work that has been done, there are gaps in our understanding of how these experiences theoretically and empirically relate to developmental processes. These gaps, and the separate literatures addressing adolescent attachment to media figures, limit our ability to fully understand the phenomenon and its influence. This portion of the dissertation begins to address these gaps by allowing young

women to speak to their own experiences and reflect on the role of these experiences in their lives. As the evidence presented here suggests, parasocial romantic relationships to celebrities may powerfully influence long-term romantic outcomes for adolescents and ultimately affect their wellbeing (Johnson et al., 2012). With uses that can be seen as both adaptive (in terms of identity development and consolidation), and mal-adaptive (as a result of the content in the media related to romantic socialization; Ward, Reed, Trinh, & Foust, 2014), this is a topic that warrants significant future examination. This examination should include continued qualitative work wherein adolescent and young adult experiences are honored and given space in larger discussions about media, sexuality, and fandom.

In the next chapter, I will develop a means to explore the possible effects of these relationships on romantic development on a larger, quantifiable level. Although the focus group participants largely denied the long-term influence of parasocial romantic attachments on their psychosocial development, research on third-person effects suggests that this self-reported denial does not eliminate the possibility of media effects. In the next chapter, I develop a quantitative measure of Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment that might be used to examine these effects at scale while lowering social desirability pressures.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Developing a Scale to Measure Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachments**

Perhaps equally important to providing a space for women to share their experiences, determining the scope and influence of these relationships on sexual socialization is essential for understanding their role in adolescent psychosocial development. The focus group data provided some insight into these effects but given the small sample and protective positioning expressed by the participants, I determined that a quantitative measurement was necessary to further engage with ARPAs in the context of psychosocial development. Researchers have approached measuring parasocial relationships from several angles. In this chapter, I review previous approaches to measuring parasocial and celebrity relationships and build on this work in order to develop and validate the novel Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment scale.

### **Measuring Parasocial Relationships**

Initial communication research on parasocial interactions focused on relationships between audience members and non-fictional media personalities (such as newscasters) and was limited to friendship and admiration-based relationships. Rubin, Perse, and Powell's (1985) Parasocial Interaction (PSI) scale (based on an earlier scale developed by Levy (1979) examining older adults' engagement with TV news) measured parasocial interactions with local newscasters. This scale has been modified to examine media figures of all types, from celebrities and non-fictional characters to fictional and even fantasy figures (for a thorough discussion, see Giles, 2002). The original authors also published a short 10-item version of the PSI scale, now in common use (Rubin & Perse, 1987). These scales measure a general experience of a parasocial

relationship as a unified construct—indeed, it has been argued that most current PSR scales capture additional theoretically distinct constructs including perceived realism, affinity, and identification, making reliable interpretation challenging (Giles, 2002; Tuchakinsky, 2010).

Some scholars have sought to develop more precise language and more nuanced measures to describe these experiences. For example, Schramm and Wirth (2010) argue that the terms parasocial interaction (PSI) and parasocial relationships (PSR) are rarely distinguished and often used interchangeably, despite what these authors see as important conceptual differences. Parasocial interactions, they argue, are one-time experiences of connection to media figures *during* exposure. In contrast, parasocial relationships involve longer-term connections to media figures that extend across several exposures and are present even when not directly exposed to the media figure (more like friendships and attachment). So, parasocial interactions are an important element of parasocial relationships but can also exist in isolation, without the development of a longer-term relationships. For teens, PSI may serve an important identity formation function (as they try on different momentary identities during exposures), whereas PSR may serve a more relational role (as practice for relationship formation with peers and romantic partners; Giles, 2002). Unfortunately, in many existing scales, the distinction between PSI and PSR is often muddy and it may be difficult to distinguish them (Klimmt et al., 2006), making it unclear whether a participant is only momentarily engaging with a media figure or experiencing a longer-term connection.

Beyond clarifying the construct of parasocial relationship, some work has been done to specify different types of parasocial relationships and to identify dimensions within these relationships. Auter and Palmgreen's (2000) Audience-Persona Interaction Scale has been used to identify four factors involved in parasocial relationships: identification with a favorite

character, interest in a favorite character, interaction with a group of favorite characters, and the problem solving abilities of a favorite character. Unlike previous factor analyses, which only ever identified single-factor solutions to measures of parasocial relationships in US samples (a series of German samples in the late 1990s showed a 3-factor structure of empathy, interaction, and companionship; Gleich, 1997), Auter and Palmgreen's work suggested an underlying structure and logic that might be used to guide interpretation of later research. This work also provided a catalyst for the development of scales to measure parasocial break-ups (Cohen, 2003), parasocial enemies (Tian & Hoffner, 2010), and parasocial love (Tukachinsky, 2010). These important developments acknowledge the umbrella term of parasocial relationships as composed of distinct constructs.

Tukachinsky's (2010) Multiple PSR scale differentiates the experience of parasocial friendship from parasocial love. The M-PSR scale divides the parasocial love experience into a) friendship communication and support, and b) physical and emotional love. Tukachinsky (2010) does an excellent job of incorporating the traditionally theorized friendship aspects of parasocial relationships and also allowing for the increased physical and emotional intimacy of a romantic relationship. At the same time, while successful in delineating these specific elements of parasocial relationships, Tukachinsky's (2010) scale focuses on the ways in which parasocial relationships might mirror interpersonal relationships and thus, the unique aspect presented by the mediated nature of parasocial love is not explicitly measured. Additionally, the items in Tukachinsky's (2010) M-PSR scale reflect an assumed level of experience with romantic relationships that may be unattainable or unlikely for young adolescents. The M-PSR scale compares PSRs to adult romantic relationships and friendships. However, the romantic development model (B.B. Brown, 1999) and data presented in Chapter II both point to early

adolescents' inexperience with romantic relationships and the ways in which early romantic experiences may not reflect dyadic adult romance.

Horton and Wohl's (1956) original theorization of parasocial relationships was based on an understanding of the relationships as both real and inherently mediated. However, in the extant literature examining parasocial relationships, researchers have focused their investigations on the aspects of these relationships that align with interpersonal relationships and appear more grounded in the "real." There are, of course, many important ways in which parasocial relationships *do* resemble interpersonal relationships and it makes sense to focus on the similarities between the two when justifying and explaining the importance of parasocial relationships (or when explicitly examining these similarities). Nevertheless, Horton and Wohl (1956) emphasize the unidirectional, mediated nature of parasocial relationships, describing the relationships as reliant on extensive fantasy and idealization, and characterized by user/audience member control. Focusing on the "realistic" dimension of parasocial relationships, current measures like those of Rubin, Perse, and Powell (1985), Auter and Palmgreen (2000), and Tukachinsky (2010) capably address this portion of Horton and Wohl's original articulation of parasocial interaction. Yet, research on parasocial relationships must account for their complex nature, including both their similarities to interpersonal relationships *and* the centrality of their mediated nature. The measure proposed here seeks to account for the multi-dimensional nature of parasocial relationships by incorporating both the "real" and mediated dimensions of the relationships.

### **Measuring Celebrity Worship**

Whereas communications research on parasocial relationships focuses primarily on similarities to "real" relationships, research from the related field of celebrity worship strongly

favors consideration and assessment of the mediated nature of idolization experiences in the development of quantitative measures. Celebrity worship is most commonly measured using the Celebrity Attitudes Scale (CAS). Developed by McCutcheon, Lange, and Houran (2002), the CAS is divided into three subscales of celebrity worship, from the least to most intense: the entertainment-social level, the intense-personal level, and the borderline-pathological level. As previously discussed (Chapter I), these levels span a range from low-level interest to all-consuming engagement. One study using this scale found that borderline-pathological level fans are those likely to engage in more extreme fan behaviors such as celebrity stalking (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2008). This scale provides important information about intensity of celebrity attachments; however, it is often used to pathologize and delineate fans as “obsessive” (p. 311) when they fall into *either* of the higher categories of fandom (McCutcheon et al., 2003). An experience akin to that of an “intense-personal” level of celebrity worship could easily be labeled as a standard parasocial relationship—a normal consequence of engagement with narrative media—in communication research. Yet, researchers in the area of celebrity worship conclude that these connections are troubling and problematic. The Celebrity Idolization Scale, developed by Engle and Kasser (2005), moderates the level of pathologizing in measuring celebrity worship while also emphasizing the mediated nature of these fan-celebrity relationships. Like the earlier parasocial relationship scales, Engle and Kasser (2005) emphasize one dimension of the relationship—in this case its mediated nature—with less attention to how viewers might experience parasocial relationships as both idealized fantasies and relationships akin to those with peers, friends, or acquaintances (Giles, 2002).

In short, previous measures of parasocial relationships have focused on friendship rather than romantic relationships and, in the cases when they do address parasocial romance, the scales

are often defined by a focus on similarities to interpersonal relationships. Celebrity worship research corrects this singular focus on the interpersonal aspects of parasocial relationships but, in doing so, may move too far in the opposite direction—emphasizing mediation over all else—while also pathologizing these relationships as abnormal clinical phenomena. None of these measures take into account the specific nature of parasocial relationships in early adolescence as developmental phenomena, perhaps distinct from parasocial relationships at other points in the life course.

### **Parasocial Relationships and Development**

To date, despite acknowledgment that parasocial romance is a frequent and important aspect of teen development (Engle and Kasser, 2005; J. D. Brown et al., 1993; Karniol, 2001), most research on parasocial relationships and development has focused on young children or adults. The work that does focus on adolescents and emerging adults trends toward examinations of same-sex idealization related to adolescent self-concept; for example, examinations of parasocial relationships in the context of body image development (Greenwood, 2009; Harrison, 1997), and career aspirations (Van Den Bulck & Beullens, 2007).

Additional work is needed to consistently measure the full romantic parasocial attachment experience, particularly for adolescents. Therefore, in the current study, I extend previous work measuring parasocial relationships by developing a unique scale to specifically measure Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachments, accounting for the complex interplay of emotional attachment, one-way engagement, and development at this stage. First, I outline the process of developing and finalizing scale items. Second, I examine the underlying structure of the scale. Finally, I examine the scale's validity and discuss its strengths and weaknesses.

## **Scale Construction**

### **Development of Scale Items**

In order to develop a series of items to measure Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment, I began by thoroughly examining the parasocial relationship literature and by revisiting the emergent themes from the focus groups discussed in the previous chapter. One major finding from the focus group research was the prevalence and power of fantasy and fantasizing as central elements of adolescent parasocial romance. Based on these sources, I built a 69-item scale structured around four theoretical categories: behaviors, emotions, cognitions, and fantasies. These categories reflect the major aspects of parasocial romantic relationships described by focus group participants and also align with our broader understanding of the elements of parasocial relationships identified in prior research (Giles, 2002). Although not included in the proposed model, behaviors were included in the scale construction process to determine whether or not they should be included in future work, given their prominence in prior literature. For each item, the scale begins, “In this section, think back to when you were 12-14 years old and respond as accurately as possible (with reference to [a previously identified media figure]).” Responses fell on a 7-item Likert-style scale ranging from 1 = Not at all like me, to 7 = Just like me. For a full list of the 69 original scale items, see Appendix B.

### **Scale Analysis**

In order to develop the most efficient and effective measure of Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachments, I fielded an online survey with the goals of a) decreasing the number of scale items to match Rubin and Perse’s (1987) 10-item model, b) determining the reliability and underlying structure of the scale, and c) examining the stability of the scale as a measurement of adolescent parasocial romance.

**Method.** A targeted population of undergraduate women at the University of Michigan completed a one-time 45-minute online survey. Participants were recruited through two distinct avenues. First, students in an introductory communication course (recruited during a different semester than that focus group participants) had the opportunity to complete the survey in order to gain required research participation credit. Second, through the University of Michigan Registrar's Office, a mass email was sent to enrolled first year women who had not taken any introductory communications courses ( $N = 1002$ ). In this email, women were invited to participate in a study on media and emotion in exchange for a chance to win one of three \$25 Amazon.com gift cards. In total, 290 women completed the survey, 201 from the Communications course and 89 from the campus-wide recruitment. It is important to note that the campus recruitment email was sent during the summer term when fewer students are on-campus or engaged in regular university email correspondence.

**Measures.** In the survey, participants were asked a series of questions designed to measure a) the characteristics of celebrity crushes, b) parasocial relationships, c) the new ARPA model, d) dating history and attachment style, and e) demographic variables. To begin, participants were asked to think back to when they were young adolescents and respond to a question asking if they had ever had a crush or felt that they were in love with a media figure or celebrity during that time. Participants were then asked to identify the celebrity and report details on the duration and nature of the relationship. All following parasocial interaction and relationship measures referenced the celebrity identified by the participant in response to these questions.

***Parasocial Relationships.*** Participants completed five previously published scales designed to measure audience member relationships with celebrities including an updated version of Rubin, Perse, and Powell's (1985) PSI scale (Rubin & Perse, 1987), Auter and Palmgreen's

(2000) Audience-Persona Interaction Scale, Tukachinsky's (2010) Multiple-PSR scale, Engle and Kasser's (2005) Celebrity Idolization Scale, and McCutcheon, Lange, and Houran's (2002) Celebrity Attitudes Scale. Summary statistics and reliability information are included below (Table III.1).

***Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachments.*** All 69 novel items from the ARPA scale were included in the survey. These items included questions about behaviors, emotions, cognitions, and fantasies. The order of appearance for the ARPA and parasocial relationship scales was randomized to account for participant fatigue and the repetitive nature of many of the questions.

Table III.1

*Descriptions and reliabilities of parasocial interaction scales.*

| Scale   | # of items | Mean | SD   | Cronbach's $\alpha$ |
|---|------------|------|------|---------------------|
| PSI Scale (Rubin & Perse, 1987)               | 17         | 3.21 | 0.70 | 0.90                |
| APSI Scale (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000)          | 22         | 2.96 | 0.69 | 0.94                |
| CIS Scale (Engle & Kasser, 2005)              | 17         | 2.68 | 0.76 | 0.90                |
| CAS Scale (McCutcheon, Lange, & Houran, 2002) | 34         | 2.40 | 0.67 | 0.94                |
| Multiple PSR (Tukachinsky, 2010)              | 24         | 3.38 | 0.85 | 0.95                |

*Note:* PSI=Parasocial Interaction Scale, APSI=Audience-Persona Interaction Scale, CIS=Celebrity Idolization Scale, CAS=Celebrity Attitude Scale, PSR=Parasocial Relationships. All scales range from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 5.

***Attachment and romantic experience.*** Hazan and Shaver's (1987) attachment scale was used to measure the attachment styles of participants. The scale consists of 15 items designed to identify whether a participant displays secure, ambivalent, or avoidant attachment in romantic relationships. After answering the attachment scale questions, participants are provided with descriptions of each attachment style and asked to identify the one that they believe best describes them. These separate measures allow for examination of participants' perception of their own attachment style and a more indirect measure of that style. Participants were also asked

to report the age at which they went on their first date, and the age at which they entered into their first serious romantic relationship.

**Demographics.** Finally, participants replied to questions regarding their race, gender, age, and class year.

**Characteristics of the Sample.** Eighty percent of participants were freshmen or sophomores in college and 75% identified as white (6.1% Asian, 6.1% bi-racial, 5.7% black). Most participants went on their first dates prior to age 17 (69.6%), with nearly a quarter (24.3%) prior to age 15. First romantic relationships generally took place between 14 and 17 years old.

Of the women who began the survey, 82.7% reported experiencing a parasocial romance or crush as an adolescent. All remaining analyses for scale development and analysis include only these women. Over 50% of the women began their parasocial romance prior to age 13, and 17.7% reported starting their crush at age 11 or younger. Some participants reported continued romantic feelings toward their celebrity crush: 11.2% said they definitely still had a crush on this figure, and another 23.2% said they still had a crush but it was not as strong as before. However, most participants reported that they either did not really (30%) or definitely did not (30%) still have feelings for the celebrity. The vast majority of participants (85.3 %) had crushes on celebrities who they considered “non-fictional.” In other words, they identified the celebrity as being a “real person” rather than a character within a narrative; for example, a crush on Daniel Radcliffe, the actor, rather than Harry Potter, the character played by the actor.

**Item reduction and reliability analysis.** The Cronbach’s alpha for the original 69 item scale was 0.98. This reliability suggested high levels of inter-correlation amongst the scale items, and an examination of changes in reliability if items were removed revealed no obvious weak items. Therefore, to reduce the length of the scale, an initial round of cuts was made. The squared

multiple correlation for each item was examined and items identified as less aligned with other items in the scale (due to lower squared multiple correlations) were removed.

An additional round of cuts considered theoretical corrections to maximize efficiency and variance. First, items were removed that appeared to measure possible outcomes rather than elements of the ARPA experience. For example, the item “I sometimes fell behind on my homework because of my relationship with this person,” implies an effect of ARPA on homework rather than a practice associated with the relationship. Second, an analysis of the behavior items in the scale revealed a very low mean (1.87) and large standard deviation (1.80), indicating that although many participants were engaging in one or two behaviors, there were few people engaging in many behaviors. Thus, the distribution of the behavioral items was skewed and suggested that the frequency of behaviors might not reflect the strength of an ARPA experience overall. Additionally, as illustrated in Chapter II, differences in behaviors may be explained by confounding variables such as free time, geographic location, or financial means, rather than the overall strength of the ARPA experience. In fact, although behavior items were highly correlated with the final ARPA scale ( $\alpha = 0.62, p < 0.01$ ), an analysis of the scatterplot revealed that this correlation was driven by extreme values. Participants who reported a very high number of ARPA-related behaviors also had high ARPA scores, however, the reverse was not always true. This finding indicates that, for the majority of respondents, the number of behaviors enacted is not consistently related to the strength of their ARPA experience. Based on this analysis and following the logic proposed in Chapter I regarding the role of behaviors in ARPA, behavior items were removed from the scale. Nonetheless, given their prominence in the fan studies literature, future research should examine whether there is a way to measure behaviors in a way that consistently indexes the strength of ARPAs. Finally, I examined item

distributions and selected items that maximized variance within the scale while maintaining an overall normal distribution. Items that were heavily skewed or limited in variance were removed.

Ultimately, I was left with a list of 10 items (Table III.2) across 3 theoretical categories: emotion, fantasy, and cognition. The overall reliability of the final 10-item scale was strong (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.92$ ) and the distribution was relatively normal. There was a slight negative skew ( $-.22$ ,  $SE = .17$ ) but it was not significant.

**Factor Analysis.** Emotion, fantasy, and cognition were previously identified as theoretical dimensions (and potential factors) of the ARPA experience. Previous factor analyses of parasocial relationship scales have generally only identified one factor in the data (for example, see Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). However, some work, including Tukachinsky's (2010) research on parasocial love, has revealed multi-factor structures. In these data, I expected that an exploratory factor analysis, allowing for correlation between factors, would produce a three-factor solution (emotion, fantasy, cognition). I expected these dimensions to be highly inter-correlated and thus analyzed the data using a maximum likelihood model with an oblique rotation. Contrary to these expectations, analysis revealed that one factor explained 57.25% of the variance in the data, and a distinct inflect point was observed on a scree plot after this first factor.

The failure to find a three-factor solution empirically does not necessarily indicate that these dimensions are conceptually redundant. Each of the subscales is sufficiently reliable (Emotion  $\alpha = 0.77$ , Fantasy  $\alpha = 0.86$ , Cognition  $\alpha = 0.80$ ), and it is likely that the construct of ARPA is made up of three correlated but theoretically distinct factors. These may, in fact, be separate dimensions but be so intimately intertwined that it is impossible to experience or activate only one. This interpretation aligns with the model of Adolescent Romantic Parasocial

Table III.2

*Final Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment scale items.*

| Label   | Mean | SD   |
|---|------|------|
| Emotion (3)   | 3.76 | 1.54 |
| My relationship with this person made me feel happy.                                    | 3.59 | 1.88 |
| When bad things happened to this person, it upset me.                                   | 3.38 | 1.77 |
| When good things happened to this person, I was excited.                                | 4.36 | 1.73 |
| Fantasy (4)   | 4.14 | 1.72 |
| I often daydreamed about this person.   | 4.15 | 1.85 |
| I imagined that this person would someday pick me out of a crowd and see me as special. | 4.07 | 2.12 |
| I imagined conversations I would have with this person if we ever met.                  | 4.31 | 1.99 |
| i imagined what it would be like to marry this person.                                  | 3.98 | 2.09 |
| Cognition (3)   | 3.89 | 1.60 |
| I wanted to know as much as I could about this person.                                  | 4.09 | 1.89 |
| I felt as though this person and I had a lot in common.                                 | 3.57 | 1.79 |
| I wanted to help support this person's career.  | 4.08 | 1.90 |
| Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment Scale   | 3.95 | 1.44 |

*Note.* Response options for each item range from 1 = not at all like me to 7 = just like me

attachments as a multi-dimensional experience.

Ultimately, it may not be necessary to distinguish between aspects of the scale in order to measure the overall experience of ARPA. Because the factor analysis did not reveal unique factors within the data but reliability analyses demonstrated the reliability of the full scale, I decided to move forward with the 10-item scale with each item weighted equally. The subscales were also determined to be reliable. Correlational analyses reveal strong correlations across the subscales (Table III.3) and it is possible that the three theoretical dimensions may each predict unique variance in outcome variables of interest, thus I maintained the theoretical subscales for further exploration.

Table III.3

*Correlations between theoretical subscales of ARPA.*

| Subscales | Emotion | Fantasy | Cognition |
|-----------|---------|---------|-----------|
| Emotion   | -       | .69**   | .75**     |
| Fantasy   | .69**   | -       | .75**     |
| Cognition | .75**   | .75**   | -         |

\*\* $p < 0.01$

**Validity of the Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment Scale.** In order to determine the validity of this scale in measuring romantic parasocial attachments, I examined concurrent and predictive validity.

Using the same survey data described above, I correlated participants' 10-item ARPA scores with scores on the other, established, parasocial relationship measures. If ARPA is measuring parasocial relationships, these scales should be significantly correlated and their findings should converge. This was the case (Table III.4). These results suggest that the ARPA

scale is measuring a construct involving parasocial relationships, though they do not establish that these relationships are romantic in nature.

Two tests were used to assess the predictive validity of the ARPA scale. First, I tested the validity of this scale as a measure of romantic parasocial relationships. To examine whether or not this new scale was specifically measuring a romantic parasocial relationship, I ran a regression predicting the participant-identified type of parasocial relationship with scores on ARPA. The types of relationship to the media figure indicated by the participant were collapsed

Table III.4

*Convergent validity of ARPA as a measure of parasocial relationships.*

| Scale                 | ARPA  | ARPA Emotion | ARPA Cognition | ARPA Fantasy |
|-----------------------|-------|--------------|----------------|--------------|
| APSI                  | .67** | .63**        | .66**          | .57**        |
| PSI                   | .70** | .63**        | .63**          | .63**        |
| Multiple PSR          | .68** | .56**        | .58**          | .67**        |
| Parasocial Friendship | .69** | .57**        | .61**          | .67**        |
| Parasocial Love       | .53** | .42**        | .46**          | .57**        |
| CAS                   | .69** | .66**        | .61**          | .62**        |
| CIS                   | .65** | .57**        | .62**          | .57**        |

*Note.*  $N = 204$ . Values indicate Pearson  $r$ 's. ARPA=Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment, APSI=Audience-Persona Interaction Scale, PSI=Parasocial Interaction Scale, PSR=Parasocial Relationships, CAS=Celebrity Attitudes Scale, CIS=Celebrity Idolization Scale. \*\* $p < 0.01$

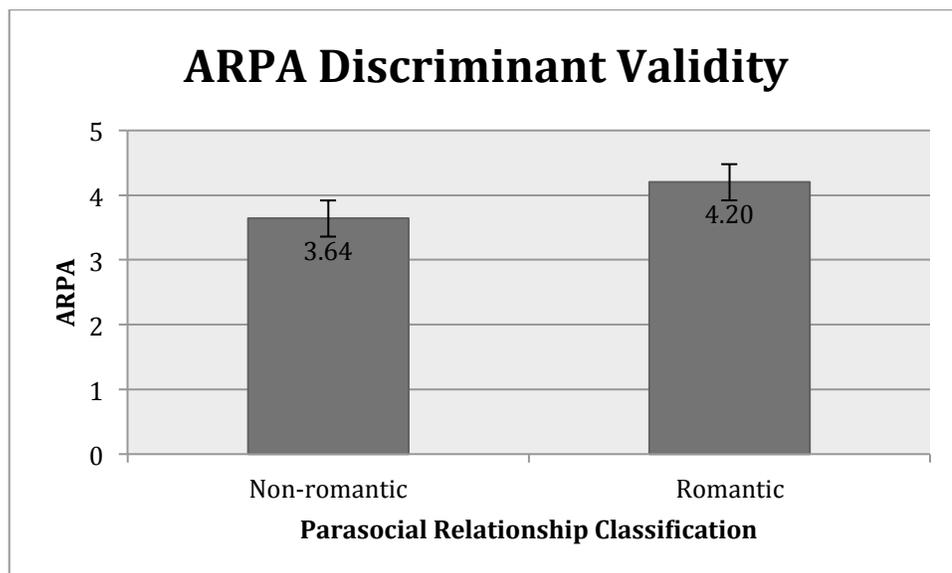
into two categories, Romantic ( $n = 104$ ), and Non-Romantic ( $n = 105$ ). The non-romantic category included relationships identified as friendship, teacher, and other. The romantic category included relationships in which participants classified the media figure as a romantic partner. If ARPA is adequately measuring romantic parasocial relationships, the ARPA score should predict relationship classification. The expected relationship was supported by the data with ARPA positively predicting romantic relationship classifications ( $X^2(1) = 7.58, p < 0.01$ , Nagelkerke  $R^2 = 0.05$ ). Participants with higher scores on ARPA were 1.31 times more likely to

report a romantic relationship than a non-romantic one; ARPA predicted the correct relationship classification 57.6% of the time. Additionally, participants who identified their relationships as romantic in nature had significantly higher ARPA scores than participants who identified their relationships as any of the other categories (Figure III.1). These findings support the validity of the ARPA scale as a measure of romantic parasocial relationships rather than parasocial relationships in general.

As an additional test of predictive validity, I examined the relation between strength of ARPAs and attachment style. Several authors address the role of attachment styles in likelihood to develop parasocial relationships with an eye toward determining whether parasocial relationships serve a compensatory or complementary purpose for audiences (Cohen, 2004).

Figure III.1

*Mean ARPA scores for non-romantic (0) vs. romantic (1) classifications.*



Cole and Leets (1999) found a relation between anxious attachment and strong parasocial relationships, concluding that these relationships might compensate for gaps in the social life of

participants classified as anxious. However, secure attachment in a sample of adolescent girls was associated with higher levels of PSRs, possibly suggesting a complementary function of parasocial relationships (Engle & Kasser, 2005). In these prior studies, strength of PSR was associated with specific types of attachment; the authors conclude that PSR is related to anxious attachment and significantly less related to avoidant attachment. Therefore, I predicted that higher levels of ARPA would predict participant attachment categorizations. Specifically, I expected anxious participants to have higher ARPA scores than avoidant participants, with secure participants somewhere in the middle.

An examination of the correlations between ARPA scores and attachment styles revealed a positive correlation between ARPA and anxious attachment ( $r = 0.20, p < 0.01$ ) as expected. Surprisingly, ARPA was also positively correlated with avoidant attachments ( $r = 0.31, p < 0.01$ ) but was not significantly correlated with secure attachment. These findings suggest that, as with other PSR scales, ARPA is differentially associated with attachment styles and that the pattern of these associations is similar, in some ways, to previous work. The unanticipated relation between ARPA and avoidant attachment may be due to the developmental nature of these relationships. I have proposed that ARPA are tools for self-socialization used in moments of transition. Specifically, I argue in Chapter I that Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachments serve as practice relationships for adolescents unprepared to enter into interpersonal relationships, a state which could arguably be considered avoidant. ARPAs, I suggest, involve high levels of fantasizing and, for people who have positive opinions of themselves but have difficulty trusting or having faith in others (classifying themselves as avoidant according to Hazan and Shaver's (1987) model of self and other), these idealized, controlled fantasies might be especially attractive.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to develop and validate an efficient scale to measure Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachments as modeled in Chapter I. Using data from focus groups with college women (discussed in Chapter II), I created 69 unique scale items that were then rigorously tested and pruned, becoming the final 10-item ARPA scale. This final scale accounts for the three identified major dimensions of the ARPA experience: cognitions, emotions, and fantasy. Previous work on parasocial relationships has examined the cognitive and emotional components of these relationships but does not include explorations of fantasy. Additionally, many previous scales use 20 or more items and focus on only one dimension of parasocial relationships. The Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment scale, described here, improves on previous measures by addressing a specific type of parasocial relationship, accounting for both the influence of development and maturation, and the previously underexplored role of fantasy elements of parasocial romances.

Caughey (1984) argues that the central feature of any relationship with a media figure, even non-romantic, is that the fan and the object of their parasocial relationship will never meet and, as such, the relationship is largely based on fantasy. Caughey (1984) defines fantasy as a subjective experience, separated from reality, in which one can explore “the fulfillment of unconscious wishes” (p. 159) and personal gratifications, and argues that media, particularly narrative media, are designed specifically to invoke fantasizing in viewers. Through first person viewpoints, immersive storylines, and appealing characters, narrative media seek to draw a viewer into the authors’ fantasy world. Beyond being transported into the fantasy world of the narrative, however, parasocial relationships with media figures require that fans create fantasies of their own in which the media figure and fan interact. As evidenced in the descriptions of

ARPAAs included in Chapter II, these relationships then last beyond the direct experience of engagement with narrative media and extend into the viewers' lives.

In fact, the media narratives surrounding many celebrities are designed to induce fantasizing. Many media characters and figures that are targeted to teen audiences are marketed as romantic fantasies designed to induce parasocial romance. Aubrey, Walus, and Click (2010) argue that teen idols are manufactured and marketed as commodities to teen girls. Narratives, press tours, and photo shoots are designed to make male stars attractive as ideal romantic partners for adolescent girls. These girls then literally buy into the fantasy relationship, purchasing merchandise, media, and other idol affiliated products. In *Twilight*, they argue, the character of Bella Swan, the female lead and Edward's love interest, is depicted as an "every-girl" with little focus on her distinguishing characteristics or personality. In this way, young women are able to insert themselves into the Bella role in the story and experience the romance with Edward themselves (Aubrey et al., 2010). In an interview, *Twilight* star Robert Pattinson, who plays Edward Cullen, joked, "Girls scream for Edward, not Robert. I still can't get a date," (Aubrey et al., 2010). According to Aubrey, Walus, and Click (2010), Pattinson's comment demonstrates that the idealized romantic idol has overshadowed reality to the point where Pattinson and his character are viewed as one and his "real" identity is erased. Caughey (1984) and Horton and Wohl (1956) similarly argue that media attempt to package and manipulate the parasocial relationship experience to capture audiences through camera angles, illusions of intimacy, and interpellation of target audiences. In recent years, the power of these relationships may have increased even further due to the rapid convergence of media outlets and narratives and the presence of celebrities (as themselves and in character) on social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook (Jenkins, 2006; Marwick and boyd, 2011).

There are several ways in which the ARPA scale might be improved and built upon. First and foremost, although development was a major consideration in the creation of scale items and participants were asked to recall their experiences as adolescents, the scale was not actually tested on an adolescent sample. It is unclear whether the same items would apply or remain valid in an adolescent sample currently experiencing romantic parasocial attachments.

Additionally, although with 10-items it is more succinct than other PSR scales, it does not appear to measure a significant amount of unique variance beyond other parasocial relationship scales (as evidenced by the correlation analyses). Tukachinsky's Multiple-PSR scale appears to be effective in terms of examining romantic parasocial relationships overall. However, the ARPA scale perhaps captures a fuller picture of the theoretical construct of parasocial romance, accounting for unidirectional mediation and fantasy, major components of the original understanding of parasociality (Horton & Wohl, 1956). The subscales of the ARPA scale, although an independent factor structure is not supported, may contribute differentially to outcomes and relations associated with ARPAs.

The Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment scale is built on a multi-dimensional understanding of adolescent romantic development and engagement with media. The lived experiences of participants are incorporated into the scale items and reflected in the non-pathologizing approach taken throughout the study. This model for ARPA should be further tested in other populations and applied to examinations of how ARPA relates to other aspects of adolescent development. One place to start is with the exploration of romantic script and schema development as it relates to ARPA experiences.

## CHAPTER IV

### **Romantic Parasocial Attachments and the Development of Romantic Scripts Schemas, and Normative Beliefs among Adolescents**

As discussed previously, adolescents' early romantic and sexual experiences are highly formative and have a large influence on cognitions, expectations, emotions, and behaviors in later romantic and sexual relationships (Collins et al., 2009; Larson et al., 1999). In fact, these early experiences likely influence development beyond the scope of sexual and romantic relationships (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). For young adolescents beginning to consider romantic relationships, attachments to celebrities can provide a means of bonding with peers as well as a safe space for practicing romantic relationships prior to actual dating (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990; J. D. Brown et al., 2009; Ward, 1995, 2002). Yet, due to the seemingly superficial and frivolous nature of these relationships (Caughey, 1984; Jenkins, 1992), limited work has been done examining the role of these relationships in adolescent development (for some examples of research on this topic, see Karniol, 2001; McCutcheon et al., 2002; and Tukachinsky, 2010). This study examines romantic attachments to media figures in adolescence as consequential socialization experiences, which relate to the development of ideas, concepts, and values about romance, identity, and sexuality.

Social Cognitive Theory posits that the media act as an instructor for viewers on social norms and beliefs via active viewer engagement, interpretation, and internalization of cognitions depicted by media (Bandura, 2001). At its inception, social cognitive theorists were particularly interested in the influence of individual media characters (Bandura, 2001; Boot, Peter, & van

Oosten, 2015). This research determined that when a viewer finds a media figure more appealing or attractive, then the social cognitive effects of media exposure are heightened (Bandura, 2001). In a parasocial relationship, we might reasonably expect for the target of the attachment to be perceived as attractive and appealing by the viewer (Giles, 2002). Evidence from the broader parasocial relationship literature demonstrates that stronger parasocial relationships can increase media effects and influence viewer interpretation of media narratives (Cohen, 2002; 2003), and the development of scripts, schemas, and normative beliefs (Basil, 1996). Romantic attachments to media figures provide high-impact exposure and engagement with media figures that individual viewers find romantically attractive and appealing. As such, based on Social Cognitive Theory, I make the argument that these relationships might shape media effects as much or more than non-romantic parasocial relationships, particularly in terms of partner preferences (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990; Burnett & Beto, 2000), relationship expectancies (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990; Burnett & Beto, 2000, Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Segrin & Nabi, 2002), and ultimately, relational happiness and overall wellbeing (Galliher et al., 1999 et al., 2012).

### **The Current Study: Hypotheses and Research Questions**

In this study, I examine the relations between recalled adolescent parasocial romantic attachments and current romantic scripts, schemas, and beliefs as well as the degree to which these recalled parasocial relationships relate to assessments of current relationships and sexual experiences. This study assesses the following hypotheses and research questions related to how adolescent romantic attachments to media figures may relate to romantic and sexual socialization. Specifically, I interrogate the proposal that “safe” celebrity relationships may be especially desirable and, in fact, adaptive in early adolescence (Conley, 2011; Karniol, 2001).

This contention, that romantic parasocial relationships could be adaptive, may seem at odds with findings from the research on celebrity worship, which has identified negative effects of these types of relationships on audiences. Research on celebrity worship, similar in many ways to the experience of romantic parasocial attachments, examines attachments to media figures that involve significant amounts of fantasy and idealization (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990). Celebrity worship is most commonly measured by assessing tendencies to worship a celebrity that involve emotional attachment, obsessive thoughts, and specific fan behaviors (McCutcheon et al., 2002), and celebrity worship research generally focuses on celebrity worship as diagnostic of negative attributes or effects in participants.

Concerns about negative effects of media on the romantic socialization of adolescents often center on issues of gender roles, norms, and expectancies (see Adams-Price & Greene, 1990; Boon & Lomore, 2001) and the effects that beliefs related to these issues can have on behavior (see Martino, Collins, Kanouse, Elliot, & Berry, 2005; Ward, Epstein, Caruthers, & Merriwether, 2011). Depictions of sexual relationships on TV, particularly in teen-targeted programming, are often stereotypical and generally portray men as sexual aggressors, women as sexual objects, relationships as a “battle of the sexes,” and sex as recreational (Glascock, 2001; Ward, 1995). Endorsement of traditional gender norms and romantic scripts may lead to decreased sexual agency (Tolman, Kim, Schooler, & Sorsoli, 2007), lower sexual self-efficacy (Martino et al., 2005), and increases in risky sexual behaviors (Tolman et al., 2007; Ward & Friedman, 2006). Additionally, the relationships portrayed are almost always heterosexual. These norms surrounding gender roles, courtship strategies, and approaches to commitment in romantic relationships have been combined under the umbrella of the heterosexual script (Tolman et al., 2007; Ward et al., 2011). According to Social Cognitive Theory, exposure to these scripts

through attractive and appealing media figures should increase adoption of the scripts among viewers.

Based on the content discussed above, evidence in the sexual socialization literature, and the tenets of Social Cognitive Theory, I predict that:

H1: Participants' recalled adolescent romantic parasocial attachments will be positively associated with endorsement of the heterosexual script.

An underlying message imbedded in the heterosexual script is the idea that, for adolescent girls, the most important thing in a woman's life is being in love and having a romantic relationship (Simon, Eder, & Evans, 1992). As such, young women learn to tie their self-esteem to the success or failure of their romantic relationships, an outcome explored by Knee, Canevello, Bush, and Cook (2007) through the creation of the Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem (RCSE) scale. High levels of RCSE have been shown to predict negative effects, including increased drinking to cope with relationship problems (Rodriguez, Knee, & Neighbors, 2014) and depression in women (Cambron, Acitelli, & Pettit, 2008). Given the narrow media depictions of sex and romance and the emphasis on the importance of these relationships in the media, I predict:

H2: Participants' recalled romantic parasocial attachments will be positively associated with Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem scores.

Although we would be right to be concerned about these potentially detrimental effects, adolescent parasocial romantic relationships may also serve an adaptive purpose. For adolescents just entering the world of dating, parasocial romantic relationships provide the opportunity to explore and decide on romantic and personal identities, to experiment with sexuality, and to seek out desirable traits for future partners without the risk of rejection, reputation loss or negative

health outcomes such as STDs or pregnancy (Engle & Kasser, 2005; Karniol, 2001). One way in which identity formation in relationships can be assessed is through romantic relationship experience, indexed by the experience of passionate love.

Likely the result of the combination of the hormonal changes of puberty and the social changes of becoming a teenager, the experience of passionate love is a rite of passage in adolescence (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986). Passionate love is defined as the experience of intense longing for romantic union with another person (Hatfield & Walster, 1978). When reciprocated, passionate love can lead to fulfilling romantic relationships, whereas unrequited passionate love can lead to despair. If combined with mastery of relationship skills, experiences of passionate love have the potential to prepare adolescents for healthy, long term, adult relationships (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986). Although there may also be negative emotions involved (e.g., obsessional thoughts, anxiety, despair after a break up), experiencing passionate love, at the very least, suggests an adolescent's emotional involvement in an interpersonal romantic relationship (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986). Whether or not the love is reciprocated, having this experience indicates developmentally appropriate attentions and practices.

The ubiquity of the experience of intense adolescent love is evident in the plethora of songs, movies, books, and television series focused on this intense, emotional experience. I posit that adolescents who are able to use romantic attachments to media figures adaptively would be more likely to experience this type of love by the time they reach late adolescence due to consolidation of their romantic identity. In other words, in using romantic parasocial attachments for sexual self-socialization, adolescents are following a standard developmental trajectory (B. B. Brown, 1999). However, it is also possible that experiencing romantic parasocial relationships in adolescence could result in unrealistic expectations about relationships such as a desire to

completely merge with another or unhealthy preoccupation with a partner, decreasing the likelihood of engagement in successful interpersonal romantic relationships (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). It follows that these relationships might also influence relationship and sexual satisfaction in emerging adulthood. Because the directionality of these effects is unknown, I ask the following research questions:

RQ1: How do recalled romantic parasocial relationship experiences in early adolescence relate to experiences of passionate love in emerging adulthood?

RQ2: How do recalled romantic parasocial relationship experiences in early adolescence relate to romantic and sexual satisfaction in emerging adulthood?

## **Methods**

### **Sample**

A targeted sample of undergraduate women at a large Midwestern university completed a 45 minute online survey. This sample was chosen in order to examine a moment of transitioning from adolescence (when the parasocial relationships were experienced) to adulthood (when participants have formed scripts, schemas, and normative beliefs about romantic relationships). Participants for this study were recruited through two distinct avenues. Approximately half of the participants ( $n = 198$ ) were recruited using a participant pool from an introductory communication course. These participants received one hour of credit towards fulfilling a research participation requirement. The other half of the participants ( $n = 208$ ) was recruited through an email invitation to participate in the study. The email was sent to a random subset ( $N = 5,003$ ) of undergraduate women (who had not participated in the previous studies or taken an introductory communications course) via the university registrar's office. The email informed recipients that, for their participation, they would be entered into a lottery to win one of three \$25

Amazon Gift Cards. The demographics of the participants recruited via each method were nearly identical (Table IV.1). Differences in age and sexual/romantic experience were non-significant. However, Communication students did differ in other demographic ways from the larger student population. For example, Communication students were significantly more likely to be white, to identify as exclusively heterosexual, and to report their religious affiliation as Catholic or Jewish. Therefore, all analyses control for recruitment sample.

The mean age of participants was 19.15 years. Eighty percent of participants identified as White or Caucasian, and 13.6% identified as Asian or Pacific Islander. The remaining participants were Black/African American (1.9%), American Indian or Alaskan Native (0.3%), or selected their race as “Other” (4.3%). Nearly five percent (4.6%) identified as Hispanic or Latina. The vast majority of participants (76.3%) described their sexual orientation as exclusively heterosexual with another 17.8% reporting predominantly heterosexual orientation, 3.0% identifying as bisexual, 1.9% as predominantly homosexual, and 1.1% as exclusively homosexual. Over half of the sample identified as religious (57.0%) with 47.6% of participants reporting Christian religious beliefs (Catholic or Protestant; remaining participants were 21.1% no religion, 16.8% Jewish, 8.4% spiritual, 2.4% Hindu, 1.9% Buddhist, and 1.1% Muslim).

## **Measures**

Participants were invited to complete an online survey on media use and emotion. At the start of the survey, participants were asked whether or not they had a crush on a celebrity when they were young teenagers (age 12-14). Those participants who responded “no” to this question were then asked if there had been a celebrity that they really liked or followed as a young teenager (in order to capture those women who might not have identified their relationship as a

Table IV.1

*Comparison of samples from Communication course and larger campus community.*

| Demographic Variables             | COMM Sample | UM Sample   |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
|                                   | Count (%)   | Count (%)   |
| <b>Race</b>                       |             |             |
| White*                            | 156 (80.00) | 139 (72.77) |
| Black                             | 4 (2.05)    | 3 (1.57)    |
| Asian or Pacific Islander*        | 18 (9.23)   | 32 (16.75)  |
| American Indian or Alaskan Native | 0 (0.00)    | 1 (0.52)    |
| Other                             | 6 (3.08)    | 10 (5.24)   |
| Hispanic                          | 11 (5.64)   | 6 (3.14)    |
| <b>Religion</b>                   |             |             |
| Protestant/Christian              | 39 (20.00)  | 52 (27.23)  |
| Catholic*                         | 53 (27.18)  | 35 (18.32)  |
| Mormon                            | 0 (0.00)    | 0 (0.00)    |
| Jewish*                           | 45 (23.08)  | 17 (8.90)   |
| Muslim                            | 2 (1.03)    | 2 (1.05)    |
| Buddhist                          | 2 (1.03)    | 5 (2.62)    |
| Hindu                             | 5 (2.56)    | 4 (2.09)    |
| Spiritual                         | 13 (6.67)   | 18 (9.42)   |
| None*                             | 25 (12.8)   | 53 (27.75)  |
| <b>Sexual Orientation</b>         |             |             |
| Exclusively heterosexual*         | 159 (81.54) | 124 (64.92) |
| Predominantly heterosexual*       | 19 (9.74)   | 47 (24.61)  |
| Bi-sexual*                        | 2 (1.03)    | 9 (4.71)    |
| Predominantly homosexual          | 2 (1.03)    | 5 (2.62)    |
| Exclusively homosexual            | 1 (0.51)    | 3 (1.57)    |

\*difference within rows is significant,  $p < .05$

“crush” but still may have experienced a parasocial romantic attachment). All participants who said yes to this or the previous question were asked to provide further information on the media figure about whom they were thinking. This information included the name of the celebrity or media figure, the age at which the crush began, the fictional status of the media figure, and whether or not they still felt attached to this media figure as emerging adults.

The next portion of the survey focused on recalled experiences of parasocial relationships and media use in adolescence. Prompted to think of the specific celebrity identified in the first section of the survey, participants completed a series of scales to assess their level of recalled parasocial attachment *at the time of the crush* (when they were 12-14 years old). In this section of the survey, participants also reported their media use in early adolescence.

The second half of the survey focused on participants' current experiences, beliefs, and affiliations. Participants completed measurements examining the endorsement of various romantic norms and beliefs, including the heterosexual script and the experience of passionate love. They were instructed to answer these scales as accurately as possible for *their present selves*. They also responded to questions regarding the role of romantic relationships in their self-esteem. Finally, participants provided information regarding their sexual and romantic experience and assessed their current relationship, sexual satisfaction, and sexual experience.

**Parasocial Romantic Relationships.** Parasocial romantic relationships were measured in two ways. First, participants completed Tukachinsky's (2010) Multiple PSR scale while thinking of the crush they identified earlier. The Multiple PSR scale differentiates the experience of parasocial friendship from parasocial love. The Multiple PSR scale divides the parasocial love experience into friendship communication and support, and physical and emotional love in order to capture both the passionate and companionate aspects of the relationships. The scale includes questions such as "I find X very attractive physically" and "I wish X could know my thoughts, my fears and my hopes," (Tukachinsky, 2010). The Cronbach's alpha for this 24-item scale was 0.96.

Second, participants completed the Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment scale developed in Chapter III. Participants responded to the scale specifically referring to their celebrity or media crush identified earlier in the survey.

The cognitive aspects of ARPA measured the thoughts and beliefs associated with parasocial romantic attachment in adolescence (3 items, Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.75$ ). These items were, "I wanted to know as much as I could about [this person]," "I wanted to help support [this person]'s career," and "I felt that [this person] and I had a lot in common."

The three items measuring the affective experience of romantic parasocial attachments included "My relationship with [this person] made me feel happy," "When good things happened to [this person], I was excited," and "When bad things happened to [this person], it upset me." Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for these items was 0.82.

Finally, four fantasy items examined the role of romantic fantasizing in these relationships (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.83$ ). These items were, "I often daydreamed about [this person]," "I imagined that [this person] would someday pick me out of a crowd and see me as special," "I imagined conversations I would have with [this person] if we ever met," and "I imagined what it would be like to marry [this person]."

For each item in the scale, participants indicated how much the statements in the scale reflected their recalled teenage selves using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = "Not at all like me," 7 = "Just like me"). Total scale score was calculated by calculating the mean of all items. Analyses of the full scale (10 items) indicated a Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.91$  (See Table IV.2 for reliability data for all scales used in this study). The 10-item scale correlates with Multiple PSR Scale at  $r = 0.74$  ( $p < 0.01$ ), suggesting that the ARPA scale is assessing similar constructs to the Multiple

PSR scale and, like Tukachinsky's scale, likely accounts for both passionate and companionate aspects of these attachments.

Table IV.2

*Scale reliabilities and distributions*

| Scale  | Items | Mean | SD   | Cronbach's $\alpha$ |
|--|-------|------|------|---------------------|
| Multiple PSR                                     | 24    | 3.03 | 0.96 | 0.96                |
| Parasocial Friendship                            | 13    | 2.85 | 1.07 | 0.96                |
| Parasocial Love                                  | 11    | 3.24 | 0.98 | 0.92                |
| Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment (ARPA) | 10    | 4.08 | 1.48 | 0.91                |
| ARPA Cognitions                                  | 3     | 4.07 | 1.61 | 0.75                |
| ARPA Emotions                                    | 3     | 3.94 | 1.65 | 0.82                |
| ARPA Fantasy                                     | 4     | 4.26 | 1.69 | 0.83                |
| Heterosexual Script                              | 21    | 3.31 | 0.71 | 0.9                 |
| Passionate Love                                  | 15    | 6.79 | 1.62 | 0.96                |
| Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem (RCSE)       | 11    | 2.35 | 0.59 | 0.87                |
| Sexual Experience Self-Evaluation - Positive     | 6     | 2.90 | 1.08 | 0.92                |
| Sexual Experience Self- Evaluation - Negative    | 10    | 1.92 | 0.81 | 0.89                |

*Note.* SD=Standard deviation. Multiple PSR, Heterosexual Script, Relationship Contingent Self-Esteem, and Sexual Experience Self-Evaluation scales range from 1 to 5, ARPA scales range from 1 to 7, and the Passionate Love scale ranges from 1 to 9.

**Media Use.** Media use was measured through two different sets of questions in order to triangulate the best estimation of media use when participants were aged 12-14 (Annenberg Media Exposure Research Group, 2008). First, participants responded to a series of questions about the amount of time spent with various media at the time of their crush. Participants reported separately how many hours per week they spent watching TV, playing video games, and listening to music (from 1 hour to 10 or more hours) on each of a typical weekday, Saturday, and Sunday. They also responded to questions about how many movies they watched in a typical month in a theater, on cable TV, on a computer or DVD, on the Internet, and on broadcast TV. For each medium, responses were summed to create a composite measure of use.

As the first time-based measure likely suffers from recall bias due to generality (Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986), it may not be useful as a precise estimate of media use. A more specific, primed measure of content exposure seeks to address this limitation. In the second measure of media use at the time of the crush, participants were presented with a list of 62 television programs airing in the 2005-2007 broadcast seasons (corresponding to when the majority of participants would have been aged 12-14). The programs were selected based on their popularity and whether or not they targeted a teen audience. All of the highest rated broadcast programs were included along with the original programming on teen-targeted networks such as ABC Family, Disney Channel, The CW Network, and TeenNick. Participants reported approximately how many episodes of each series they had seen, with response options ranging from “Never” to “Most or all of the episodes.” Participants completed a similar series of questions asking about the most popular movies during the same time period. Movies were selected from the most popular box office hits rated G, PG, and PG-13 (Internet Movie Database IMDB.com). A few R rated movies that may have been particularly appealing to teens were also included (for example *The Hangover* and *Sex and the City*). Respondents were instructed to “indicate which of the following movies you saw as an adolescent.” Response options were binary, “Never saw it” and “Saw it.” Responses to these questions were summed for movies and TV separately to create additional indices of media exposure.

**Romantic Norms and Beliefs.** Romantic norms and beliefs were measured using established scales. Participants were asked to respond to these scales based on their current selves, rather than their recalled 12-14 year old selves.

*Heterosexual Script.* To measure belief in traditional norms and gender roles related to romantic relationships, participants completed the Heterosexual Script scale (Seabrook, Ward,

Reed, Manago, Giaccardi, & Lippman, 2016). The scale includes 21 items with response options spanning from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree” on a 5-point Likert scale. The scale contains questions such as, “Girls should do whatever they need to (e.g. use make-up, buy attractive clothes, work out) to look good enough to attract a date/partner,” “It is natural for a guy to want to admire or check out other people, even if he is dating someone,” and, “Guys are more interested in physical relationships and girls are more interested in emotional relationships.” Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for the scale in this study was 0.90.

*Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem.* Relationship-Contingent Self Esteem (RCSE) refers to the extent to which one’s perceived self-worth is reliant on the status, process, and outcome of romantic relationships (Knee et al., 2007). The 11-item RCSE scale included responses on a 5-item Likert scale ranging from “Not at all like me” to “Extremely like me.” Internal reliability was Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.87$  in this sample, similar to Knee et al.’s (2007) reported reliability of 0.88 in their original study. “I feel better about myself when it seems like my partner and I are getting along,” and “When my partner criticizes me or seems disappointed in me, it makes me feel really bad,” are two of the questions included in this scale.

*Experience of Passionate Love.* To measure their experiences of passionate love, participants completed the short version of Hatfield and Sprecher’s (1986) Passionate Love Scale. This scale asked participants to think of the person whom they loved most passionately *at that moment*. If they were not in love at the time of the survey, they were asked to think of the last person they loved passionately. If they had never been in love, they were asked to think of the person whom they came closest to caring for in that way and to answer all questions thinking of that person. The scale consisted of 15 items with response options on a 9-point scale with endpoints of “Not at all true” and “Definitely true.” Items included, “I have an endless appetite

for affection from this person,” “I want this person to know me - my thoughts, my fears, and my hopes,” and “I get extremely depressed when things don't go right in my relationship with this person.” Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.96$  for the short version of the scale used in this sample.

**Sexual and Romantic History.** Participants were then asked to report their experience with dating and relationships including the age at which they went on their first date, their current relationship status, their sexual history, and their sexual and romantic satisfaction in their current relationships. Participants also assessed their current level of sexual experience by reporting positive and negative evaluations regarding their sexual experience. The 16 items assessing self-evaluation of sexual experience were transformed into two indices: positive assessments (6) and negative assessments (10). Positive assessments included items like feeling comfortable, proud, pleased, and happy about sexual experience. Some examples of negative responses about sexual experience included feeling regretful, insecure, embarrassed, anxious, or ashamed. The mean of the positive items was calculated and became the positive self-evaluation of sexual experience index score and the mean of the negative items became the negative self-evaluation of sexual experience index ( $\alpha_{\text{positive}} = 0.92$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{negative}} = 0.89$ ).

**Demographics** Finally, participants responded to standard demographic questions regarding their age, race, religion, sexual orientation, and socio-economic class. Participants also reported their level of religiosity, responding to the question, “Do you consider yourself religious or spiritual?” using a 5-point scale.

## **Analyses**

Data were examined using correlation and multiple regression in order to understand the relation between romantic parasocial attachments and romantic socialization. First, correlation analyses were performed to determine possible confounding variables and to identify control

variables to include in the regressions. Then, simultaneous regressions were used to test predictive models. To aid with interpretability of regression analyses, ARPA scores were transformed to reflect values between 0 and 1 so that all regression coefficients reflect the change in the outcome variable associated with the difference between the lowest and highest ARPA scores.

## **Results**

### **Prevalence and Nature of Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachments**

Of the 406 participants, over ninety percent (92.6%) reported having a crush on or being a big fan of a media figure in early adolescence. All remaining analyses included only these participants ( $N = 376$ ), and all but two (99.2%) of these participants reported attachment to male media figures. In terms of the current status of parasocial relationships, 23% ( $n = 86$ ) still felt attached to the media figure at the time of the survey. Non-fictional media figures accounted for 78% of the crushes; Some of the most commonly cited media figures were Aaron Carter, Zac Efron, Jesse McCartney, Joe Jonas, and Justin Bieber. The remaining 22% of participants reported crushes on fictional characters, largely Harry Potter (from *Harry Potter*) and Edward Cullen (from *Twilight*) but also Jacob Black (*Twilight*), Aragorn (*The Lord of the Rings*), and Derek Morgan (from CBS's series, *Criminal Minds*). Nearly 65% ( $n = 244$ ) of participants developed their celebrity crushes by age 12 and 16.6% ( $n = 62$ ) reported beginning their crushes prior to age 10.

### **Initial Analyses**

It is possible that both reports of Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachments and scores on the romantic socialization variables could have been influenced by individual variables such

as recruitment method, or by general media exposure. To examine this possibility, correlations were computed between demographic, media use, ARPA, and romantic socialization variables.

Recruitment method was correlated with both ARPA experiences and beliefs about gender—students from the Communications department sample were more likely than those in the wider campus sample to endorse the gender norms represented in the heterosexual script and also reported more intense ARPA experiences (Table IV.3). This difference in ARPA experiences is not surprising, as students enrolling in intro Communication courses likely have greater interest and engagement with media than students not electing this course. This increased engagement in media among Communications students suggests that we might expect increased media effects (such as endorsement of the traditional gender roles commonly presented in media; Ward, 2002). The correlation analysis also revealed a limited association of content viewed on TV and frequency of movie attendance with endorsement of the heterosexual script (Table IV.3). Increased reported exposure to popular shows and movie attendance in adolescence related to increased endorsement of the heterosexual script. The other media use variables (TV viewing frequency, movie viewing content) were unrelated to the outcome variables.

I also examined individual differences in religiosity, sexual orientation, and romantic experience as they related to the key romantic socialization variables of interest. Religiosity was included as a proxy for family socialization and values. Increased religiosity was not significantly associated with endorsement of the heterosexual script, Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem, or experiences of passionate love. Further, religiosity was not associated with evaluations of romantic experience or with strength of ARPA relationships. Race was also examined as a possible correlate of the variables of interest but, likely due to the limitations of

Table IV.3

Correlations between demographics, media use, ARPA, and romantic socialization variables.

| Measure                        | Heterosexual |        |       | Passionate |        | Relationship Satisfaction |          |          | Sexual Experience Self-Evaluation |  |
|--------------------------------|--------------|--------|-------|------------|--------|---------------------------|----------|----------|-----------------------------------|--|
|                                | ARPA         | Script | Love  | RCSE       | Sexual | Overall                   | Positive | Negative |                                   |  |
| Sample                         | -.16**       | -.25** | -.04  | .04        | -.03   | -.10                      | -.02     | .04      |                                   |  |
| Religiosity                    | -.01         | -.05   | -.09  | -.00       | .01    | -.05                      | .05      | -.05     |                                   |  |
| Sexual Orientation             | -.01         | -.17** | .02   | -.02       | .03    | .06                       | -.00     | .05      |                                   |  |
| Sexual Experience <sup>a</sup> | -.03         | .09    | .23** | .11**      | .40**  | .31**                     | .44**    | -.27**   |                                   |  |
| Current Relationship Status    | -.01         | -.14** | .26** | .13*       | .53**  | .56**                     | .42**    | -.22**   |                                   |  |
| TV Viewing                     |              |        |       |            |        |                           |          |          |                                   |  |
| Frequency                      | .19**        | .05    | .05   | .04        | .02    | .05                       | .01      | .10      |                                   |  |
| Content                        | .21**        | .18**  | .04   | .06        | .04    | -.09                      | .03      | .10      |                                   |  |
| Movie Viewing                  |              |        |       |            |        |                           |          |          |                                   |  |
| Frequency                      | .18**        | .11*   | -.01  | .00        | .05    | .02                       | .06      | .08      |                                   |  |
| Content                        | .11*         | .06    | -.01  | .02        | .06    | .02                       | -.04     | .16*     |                                   |  |

Note. N=389. ARPA=Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment; RCSE=Relationship Contingent Self-Esteem. Sample 1=Communication Students, 2=Non-Communications Students; Sexual Orientation 1=Exclusively heterosexual, 5=exclusively homosexual; Sexual Experience 0=Not in a relationship, 1=In a relationship. All correlations involving dichotomous variables (sample, relationship status, sexual experience) are point-biserial correlations and all other correlations are standard Pearson correlations.

<sup>a</sup>Sexual experience refers to whether or not the participant indicated ever engaging in vaginal intercourse.

\*Correlation is significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level.

\*\*Correlation is significant at the  $p < 0.01$  level.

the sample, it was not possible to detect any influence of race.<sup>2</sup> I did not test for socio-economic differences in predicting ARPA or the outcome variables, largely due to the homogeneity of the sample. Most idols presented in mass media are white and are often portrayed as wealthy (Aubrey, Walus, & Click, 2010). Also, practices associated with fandom might be more or less accepted depending on cultural context or financial means. Thus, I might expect that cultural norms associated with both race and SES to relate to the types of celebrities to whom adolescents are attached, the nature of the attachments, and subsequent practices associated with it.

Unsurprisingly, participants who did not identify as heterosexual reported lower levels of endorsement of the heterosexual script ( $r = -0.17, p < 0.01$ ) than heterosexual participants. Experience with vaginal sex (0 = not experienced, 1 = experienced) was correlated with RCSE ( $r = 0.11, p < 0.01$ ), experiences of passionate love ( $r = 0.23, p < 0.01$ ), and evaluations of sexual experience ( $r_{positive} = 0.44, p < 0.01$ ;  $r_{negative} = -0.27, p < 0.01$ ). Current relationship status (0 = not in a relationship, 1 = in a relationship) was correlated with evaluations of sexual experience ( $r_{positive} = 0.42, p < 0.01$ ;  $r_{negative} = -0.22, p < 0.01$ ), RCSE ( $r = 0.13, p < 0.05$ ), and experiences of passionate love ( $r = 0.26, p < 0.01$ ). In other words, being in a relationship and having sexual experience were associated with more positive evaluations of sexual experience, fewer negative evaluations of sexual experience, higher levels of RCSE, and increased likelihood of passionate

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<sup>2</sup> Evidence from Dal Cin, Stoolmiller, and Sargent (2013) suggests that mainstream media may not affect all racial groups equally. Specifically, mainstream, largely white-oriented, media did not affect African American adolescents in their study on movie smoking. However, black-oriented media did appear to impact African American participants. In the ARPA survey, very ethnic minority, non-mainstream US media stars were identified by participants and those that were identified were predominantly Asian. Nevertheless, I attempted to detect any effects of race in this sample. Model IV.5 was analyzed with race as a potential moderator and no significant effect was detected.

love experiences. Both of these variables (sexual experience and relationship status) were also positively correlated with relationship satisfaction (sexual and overall).

### **Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment and Romantic Socialization**

Before running regression analyses, I examined partial correlations between the full Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment scale and the romantic socialization outcomes. The reason for this analysis was to demonstrate the independent relation between ARPA and romantic socialization, beyond the influence of media exposure or sample, two variables associated with the key concepts of interest. Given the positive correlations between media use and Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachments, it is possible that any effect of ARPA could, in fact, be the result of straightforward cultivation effects. In other words, it is possible that increased media exposure alone could be responsible for changes in beliefs about romantic relationships, with parasocial relationships being just a by-product of this media exposure. If cultivation effects were occurring, I would expect media use to correlate with the outcome variables and, in regressions, perhaps eclipse the contribution of ARPA, in terms of variance explained. However, because media exposure was only correlated with outcome variables in two cases, this seems unlikely. Nevertheless, I control for media use throughout the analyses in order to examine the unique correlations between ARPA and the outcome variables of interest.

Results of partial correlation analyses between these variables revealed that adolescent experiences of romantic parasocial attachments are positively correlated with endorsement of the heterosexual script,  $r = 0.18, p < 0.01$ , experiences of passionate love,  $r = 0.20, p < 0.01$ , Relationship Contingent Self-Esteem,  $r = 0.18, p < 0.01$ , and negative evaluations of sexual experience,  $r = 0.20, p < 0.01$  (Table IV.4). Positive evaluations of sexual experience

Table IV.4

*Partial correlations between recalled Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment and relationship norms and beliefs.<sup>a</sup>*

| Measure                             | Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment |           |         |         |
|-------------------------------------|---|-----------|---------|---------|
|                                     | Overall                                   | Cognition | Emotion | Fantasy |
| Heterosexual Script                 | .18**                                     | .16**     | .15**   | .18**   |
| Passionate Love                     | .20**                                     | .13*      | .11*    | .25**   |
| Relationship Contingent Self Esteem | .18**                                     | .14**     | .14**   | .18**   |
| Relationship Satisfaction           |   |           |         |         |
| Sexual                              | -.04                                      | -.03      | -.06    | -.04    |
| Overall                             | .00                                       | .00       | -.02    | .01     |
| Evaluations of Sexual Experience    |   |           |         |         |
| Positive                            | -.07                                      | -.10*     | -.07    | -.04    |
| Negative                            | .20**                                     | .19**     | .17**   | .19**   |

<sup>a</sup>Controlling for media exposure (TV Content) and Sample.

\*Correlation is significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level.

\*\*Correlation is significant at the  $p < 0.01$  level.

were only marginally associated with the cognition items in the ARPA scale,  $r = -0.10$ ,  $p < 0.10$ , and were not correlated with the full scale or any of the other subcomponents.

H1: Participants' recalled adolescent romantic parasocial attachments will be positively associated with endorsement of the heterosexual script.

Based on Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2001), the first hypothesis examined the relation between the recalled experience of parasocial romance in adolescence and endorsement of the heterosexual script in early adulthood. A model predicting endorsement of the heterosexual script including sample, media use, sexual orientation, and ARPA experience as predictors was significant ( $R^2 = 0.10$ ,  $F(360) = 10.23$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Within this model, ARPA was a significant predictor of endorsement of the heterosexual script,  $b = 0.34$ ,  $p < 0.01$  (Table IV.5). Participants who recalled more intense or strong ARPA relationships were more likely to

Table IV.5

*Summary of regression analyses for ARPA as a predictor of endorsement of the Heterosexual Script.*

| Variable           | Heterosexual Script |      |              |
|--------------------|---------------------|------|--------------|
|                    | b                   | SE b | 95% CI       |
| Constant           | 2.50**              | .21  | [2.08, 2.91] |
| Sample             | -.21**              | .07  | [-.35, -.08] |
| Media Exposure     | .23                 | .25  | [-.26, .73]  |
| Sexual Orientation | -.11*               | .04  | [-.19, -.03] |
| ARPA               | .34**               | .12  | [.10, .58]   |
| R <sup>2</sup>     | .10                 |      |              |
| F                  | 10.23**             |      |              |

*Note.* N=378. ARPA=Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment; Sample 1=Communication Students, 2=Non-Communications Students; Sexual Orientation 1=Exclusively heterosexual, 5=exclusively homosexual  
 \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

endorse the gender role norms represented by the heterosexual script. Participant sample was also strong predictor of endorsement of the heterosexual script,  $b = -0.21$ ,  $p < 0.01$ , indicating that students studying communication were, in fact, less supportive of the idea represented by the heterosexual script than students in the larger undergraduate population, after accounting for the other predictors in the model. Hypothesis 1 is supported.

H2: Participants' recalled romantic parasocial attachments will be positively associated with Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem (RCSE) scores.

The second hypothesis examined RCSE in early adulthood as it relates to recalled romantic attachments to media figures in adolescence. It was expected that Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment would positively predict RCSE. As demonstrated in Table IV.6, higher scores on the ARPA scale, representing more intense experiences, were related to higher levels

of RCSE,  $b = 0.51, p < 0.01, R^2 = 0.06, F(360) = 4.47, p < 0.01$ , controlling for sample, media use, sexual experience, and relationship status. Hypothesis 2 is supported.

RQ1: How do recalled romantic parasocial relationship experiences in early adolescence relate to experiences of passionate love in emerging adulthood?

My first research question addressed the interaction between ARPA and the experience of passionate love. The mean passionate love score is particularly high (6.79 on a 9 point scale), indicating high levels of experience with passionate love within the sample. The regression results in Table IV.6 demonstrate that, in a model accounting for sample, media exposure, sexual experience, and relationship status, there is a unique positive relation between ARPA and experiences of passionate love,  $b = 1.49, p < 0.01, R^2 = 0.13, F(360) = 11.27, p < 0.01$ , such that

Table IV.6

*Summary of regression analyses for ARPA as a predictor of Relationship Contingent Self Esteem (RCSE) and Passionate Love.*

| Variable                       | RCSE   |      |              | Passionate Love |      |               |
|--------------------------------|--------|------|--------------|-----------------|------|---------------|
|                                | b      | SE b | 95% CI       | b               | SE b | 95% CI        |
| Constant                       | 3.47** | .29  | [2.89, 4.04] | 7.75**          | .67  | [6.44, 9.10]  |
| Sample                         | -.02   | .08  | [-.18, .14]  | .25             | .19  | [-.12, .62]   |
| Media Exposure                 | .05    | .31  | [-.55, .66]  | -.29            | .69  | [-1.65, 1.06] |
| Sexual Experience <sup>a</sup> | -.12   | .08  | [-.28, .04]  | -.64**          | .19  | [-1.00, -.27] |
| Relationship Status            | -.15   | .08  | [-.32, .01]  | -.63**          | .19  | [-1.01, -.26] |
| ARPA                           | .51**  | .15  | [.22, .80]   | 1.49**          | .34  | [.82, 2.15]   |
| R <sup>2</sup>                 | .06    |      |              | .13             |      |               |
| F                              | 4.47** |      |              | 11.27**         |      |               |

*Note.* N=372. ARPA=Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment; Sample1=Communication Students, 2=Non-Communications Students; Sexual Experience 0=no, 1=yes; Relationship Status 0=Not in a relationship, 1=In a relationship.

<sup>a</sup>Sexual experience refers to whether or not the participant indicated ever engaging in vaginal intercourse.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

the stronger a participant’s recalled ARPA experience, the more likely they are to have experienced passionate love.

RQ2: How do recalled romantic parasocial relationship experiences in early adolescence relate to romantic and sexual satisfaction in emerging adulthood?

Finally, I asked whether romantic parasocial relationships in adolescence might affect relationship and sexual satisfaction in emerging adulthood. As Table IV.7 demonstrates, for participants currently in a romantic relationship ( $n = 135$ ), ARPA scores were not related to overall relationship or sexual satisfaction. Higher levels of sexual experience were associated with lower levels of sexual satisfaction ( $b = -0.49, p < 0.05, R^2 = 0.07, F(135) = 2.55, p < 0.05$ ).

Table IV.7

*Summary of regression analyses for ARPA as a predictor of Relationship Satisfaction.<sup>a</sup>*

| Variable                       | Sexual Satisfaction |      |               | Overall Relationship Satisfaction |      |              |
|--------------------------------|---------------------|------|---------------|-----------------------------------|------|--------------|
|                                | b                   | SE b | 95% CI        | b                                 | SE b | 95% CI       |
| Constant                       | 5.35**              | .57  | [4.22, 6.47]  | 5.01**                            | .40  | [4.24, 5.83] |
| Sample                         | -.17                | .16  | [-.49, .15]   | -.04                              | .11  | [-.26, .19]  |
| Media Exposure                 | -.13                | .64  | [-1.38, 1.13] | -.48                              | .45  | [-1.36, .41] |
| Sexual Experience <sup>b</sup> | -.49*               | .17  | [-.83, -.14]  | -.14                              | .12  | [-.38, .10]  |
| ARPA                           | .00                 | .26  | [-.52, .52]   | .08                               | .19  | [-.29, .45]  |
| R <sup>2</sup>                 | .07                 |      |               | .02                               |      |              |
| F                              | 2.55*               |      |               | .55                               |      |              |

*Note.* N=135. ARPA=Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment; Sample 1=Communication Students, 2=Non-Communications Students; Sexual Experience 0=no, 1=yes.

<sup>a</sup>Only participants who indicated that they were in a romantic relationship are included in this analysis.

<sup>b</sup>Sexual experience refers to whether or not the participant indicated ever engaging in vaginal intercourse.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

To examine participant evaluation of sexual experience, I created a model including current relationship status, media use, sexual experience, sample, and ARPA as predictors. In this model (Table IV.8), higher scores on the ARPA scale significantly predicted increased

reports of negative self-evaluations of sexual experience (including shame, anxiety, lack of self-confidence, and frustration),  $b = 0.54$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $R^2 = 0.13$ ,  $F(359) = 11.25$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . In terms of sexual experience, participants who indicated that they had engaged in vaginal intercourse were more likely to have higher negative self-evaluations and lower positive self-evaluations than those who had not engaged in vaginal intercourse. Participants who were in a relationship at the time of the survey also reported higher negative and lower positive self-evaluations.

Table IV.8

*Summary of regression analyses for ARPA as a predictor of Sexual Experience Self-Evaluation.*

| Variable                       | Sexual Experience Self-Evaluation |      |              |          |      |              |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------|--------------|----------|------|--------------|
|                                | Positive                          |      |              | Negative |      |              |
|                                | b                                 | SE b | 95% CI       | b        | SE b | 95% CI       |
| Constant                       | 5.03**                            | .38  | [4.28, 5.78] | .44      | .31  | [-.18, 1.05] |
| Sample                         | .09                               | .11  | [-.12, .30]  | .01      | .09  | [-.16, .18]  |
| Media Exposure                 | -.07                              | .40  | [-.85, .71]  | .58      | .32  | [-.06, 1.21] |
| Sexual Experience <sup>a</sup> | -.75**                            | .11  | [-.96, -.54] | .36**    | .09  | [.19, .54]   |
| Relationship Status            | -.63**                            | .11  | [-.85, -.42] | .22*     | .09  | [.04, .39]   |
| ARPA                           | -.21                              | .19  | [-.59, .17]  | .54**    | .16  | [.23, .85]   |
| R <sup>2</sup>                 | .27                               |      |              | .13      |      |              |
| F                              | 27.82**                           |      |              | 11.25**  |      |              |

*Note.* N=375. ARPA=Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment; Sample 1=Communication Students, 2=Non-Communications Students; Sexual Experience 0=no, 1=yes; Relationship Status 0=Not in a relationship, 1=In a relationship.

<sup>a</sup>Sexual experience refers to whether or not the participant indicated ever engaging in vaginal intercourse.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

## Discussion

These results supports a unique relation between ARPA and endorsement of the heterosexual script, experiences of passionate love, RCSE, and negative sexual self-evaluation beyond the cultivation effects of media and the influence of sexual orientation or experience. As these analyses suggest, in evaluating their current romantic experiences, beliefs, and self-assessment, recalled parasocial romantic attachments to media figures seem to play a detectable

role in participant understandings of their adolescent romantic and sexual development. Through an examination of the strength of parasocial attachments and romantic norms and beliefs, these data provide evidence for the prevalence and importance of these relationships in the lives of young teenagers entering the dating world, or, at minimum, to the importance and prevalence of recalled ARPAs in participants' current beliefs and evaluations. Spitzberg and Cupach (2008) found that 90% of their sample of college students had been attracted to a celebrity at some point in their lives. Karniol's (2001) interviews with teen fans included only one (out of 50 participants) who did not have a male idol. The sample examined here aligns well with these findings, with nearly 93% of the female participants reporting a heterosexual celebrity crush in adolescence.

Certainly there are myriad influences on adolescent romantic and sexual development including peers, family, personal experience, and individual differences. It is also likely that the relations between these constructs are reciprocal and mutually constitutive. Nevertheless, this ecological approach does not diminish the importance of examining the role of the media and adolescents' relationships with the media. This study provides an initial foundation for future research on romantic parasocial attachments and their role in adolescent development. Although the effects observed in these data are cross-sectional, they do provide a baseline from which to launch further examinations of ARPAs. Given the length of time between the recalled experience and reported beliefs (which likely attenuates relations), the scale at which these relationships occur within the population, and the extent to which the media have previously been shown to play a role in shaping adolescent sexual and romantic socialization, this further work is unquestionably significant.

Further, the Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment scale represents a multidimensional understanding of these relationships that includes the often-overlooked component of fantasy. In parasocial romantic relationships, fantasy is a major means of exploration of self and other. By imagining and fantasizing about a relationship with a media figure, teens can assess and understand their feelings and emotions related to romance and sexuality (Engle & Kasser, 2005). Additionally, lack of experience with real relationships may lead to an increased need for fantasy throughout the sexual socialization process. In Moffitt's (1993) study of teen romance readers, the experiences of fantasy were "an actual source of reality and a means for them to experience through the text their expected identities as adult, woman and lover," (p. 245). Building on previous work examining parasocial love and celebrity worship, this research accounts for multiple facets of Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachments, including fantasy components. The inclusion of the fantasy elements in the ARPA scale broadens the understanding of romantic attachments to media figures, suggesting possible future avenues of media research on its effects through cognitive, emotional, and fantasized pathways.

The present results might be interpreted as showing the relation between romantic attachments to media figures in adolescence and romantic scripts, schemas, and beliefs in early adulthood. At the very least, results suggest that recollections of adolescent romantic attachments to media figures may relate to current beliefs and attitudes related to sex, gender, and relationships. Higher RCSE scores indicate a tendency to value the status of a relationship over the individual self (Knee et al., 2007). This means that when a relationship is going badly, there are likely serious implications for self-worth in these participants. Literature on self-esteem suggests that these forms of contingent self-esteem likely have negative relations with self-

determinacy in a relationship, one of the major factors in romantic relationship functioning and overall wellbeing (Patrick, Knee, Canevello, & Lonsbary, 2007). Endorsement of the heterosexual script might be assumed to have similarly detrimental effects on participants. Beliefs in traditional gender roles and notions of femininity and masculinity have been shown to affect sexual decision-making, specifically predicting a decreased likelihood of using contraception and a younger age of sexual initiation (Ward, 2002). Ward (2002) also suggests that adherence to these traditional roles in romantic relationships may limit young women's comfort in acting as an agentic sexual subject. Recalled romantic parasocial relationships among adolescents in this sample were associated with higher levels of RCSE and endorsement of the heterosexual script—outcomes requiring further exploration.

Despite these findings, the experience of Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment may yet serve an adaptive purpose in sexual socialization. Parasocial romance is a frequent and important aspect of teen development that allows teens to safely begin to explore adulthood without risking themselves, their hearts, or their social standing (J.D. Brown et al., 1993; Engle & Kasser, 2005; Karniol, 2001). Researchers interested in celebrity worship have focused on media as safe means of exploring romance and sexuality prior to engaging in real life romantic relationships (Karniol, 2001). Audiences control their relationships with media figures and idealize the targets of their affection (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990; Greene & Adams-Price, 1990; Willis, 1972). This study provides evidence of a relation between recalled adolescent romantic parasocial attachments and the likelihood of having experienced passionate love, a possible indicator of successful or normative psychosocial development. Additionally, the experience of passionate love may result in both positive and negative consequences, depending on the nature of specific relationships. The ability to experience passionate love may indicate a

level of mastery of emotional relationships and relationship identity (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986) but may also indicate an idealization of romantic love or an overemphasis on its importance to self-worth (Knee et al., 2007; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). In fact, within this sample, passionate love was correlated with RCSE at  $r = 0.42$ ,  $p < 0.01$ .

The current analysis is not without limitations. First, with a limited sample of undergraduate, largely Caucasian, college women, it is difficult to generalize these findings and observations to a larger population. More broadly, it is unlikely that these experiences of romantic parasocial attachment to celebrities in adolescence are limited to the population of heterosexual women.

Second, the results presented here are based on recalled experiences. The participants were in their freshmen and sophomore years of college and were asked to reflect upon their experiences as young teens and adolescents. Although it would be beneficial to hear directly from teens about their experiences as they are occurring, admitting to celebrity crushes and talking in-depth about those crushes may be seen as risky by adolescents. These perceived risks are born out in the narratives of the focus group participants examined in Chapter II. Given the way that fandom is depicted in the media, admitting to an emotional relationship with a celebrity or character can have negative connotations and teens may perceive possible negative consequences, even in an anonymous survey (Jenkins, 1992). Additionally, younger adolescents may not have been able to thoughtfully reflect on these emotional experiences in the same ways as older adolescents and young adults. Although criticisms of retrospective self-reports raise concerns regarding the limitations of memory, there is evidence to suggest that adults' recollections of their childhood experiences, particularly unique or consequential experiences, tend to be fairly accurate (Brewin et al., 1993). This is particularly true when the reports are

based on confirming events rather than negating them—as when confirming or explaining the experience of adolescent crushes (Brewin et al., 1993). Ultimately, there is a limit to self-reflection—regardless of whether or not it is retrospective.

Finally, these data are cross-sectional and limited in their scope. It is not possible to draw conclusions about causality from cross-sectional survey data. Participants reported on recalled media use and parasocial experiences that occurred in their early teen years, likely before they started dating; Their experience of passionate love, romantic schemas, and romantic relationship experience were reported in the present. From this, I might infer that current perceptions of the fantasies of adolescence may have an influence on later experience of or desire for passionate love; however, significant further evidence is required to determine causal relationships. Specifically, longitudinal research could address causality and alternative explanations for the association between ARPA and the variables examined here. For example, a third variable such as family socialization might lead to both intense ARPA experiences and higher scores in the romantic socialization variables. I attempted to control for alternate causal explanations through the examination of religiosity (as a stand-in for family socialization), sexual orientation, relationship status, and sexual experience as they relate to both ARPA and the outcomes of interest. Based on the model proposed in Chapter I, I would expect constructs such as religiosity and sexual orientation to fall into the Individual Contextual Factors category, likely influencing both ARPA and interpersonal romantic relationships. No evidence was found to support the influence of religiosity on any of the variables of interest; thus, this construct was dropped from the regressions. The nature and extent of sexual experience did seem to relate to the outcomes of interest and, as such, they were included in the models as predictors (perhaps reflecting progression through B.B. Brown's, 1999, romantic relationship development model). Accounting

for variance predicted by these contextual and reciprocal romantic variables, the evidence presented here supports a unique relation between ARPA and endorsement of the heterosexual script, experiences of passionate love, RCSE, and negative sexual self-evaluation beyond the cultivation effects of media and the influence of the variables discussed above. However, religiosity cannot fully account for family socialization or values, and other alternative explanations remain possibilities. A longitudinal approach to understanding these relationships would provide greater insight into the developmental pathways and directionality at play.

Nevertheless, this study provides important initial information regarding the role of romantic attachment to media figures in adolescence. Parasocial romantic relationships have the potential to be an adaptive means of self-socialization through the development of romantic identity within a safe space. However, in the data presented here, recalled romantic parasocial attachments in adolescence appear largely maladaptive—resulting in reliance on romantic relationships as a foundation of self-worth, negative evaluations of sexual experience, and endorsement of traditional gender roles. Of particular concern is my finding that stronger recalled romantic parasocial attachments in early adolescence are associated with increased negative feelings about one’s own sexual experience level in young adulthood, including insecurity and shame. These results may be due to the nature of media portrayals and characterizations. Given that media portrayals often privilege traditional gender roles and idealize romance and sexuality (Pardun, 2002; Ward, 2002), it is no surprise that in-depth engagement with media through romantic parasocial attachments would be associated with troublesome outcomes. This finding does not, however, rule out the possibility of the developmentally positive uses for these relationships that have been previously theorized, and further work examining this possibility is warranted. In a media environment saturated with

celebrity culture, exploring the ways in which audiences, particularly adolescents, engage with media and media figures is essential to critical examination of contemporary society and understanding sexual development.

## CHAPTER V

### Conclusion

In the summer of 2012, paparazzi photos revealed that *Twilight* star Kristen Stewart had cheated on her co-star boyfriend, Robert Pattinson, with a popular director. In reaction to these photos, avid fans of the *Twilight* movie series took to social media sites to express their shock and disappointment that Stewart would betray their beloved Rob. Some fans even threatened to injure or kill Stewart, including one fan, who tweeted, “Dear Kristen Stewart, Thank you for cheating on Rob. Now he’s mine. But I’m still going to kill you for breaking his heart,” (www.jezebel.com 7/25/12). Several months later, after the couple had reconciled, a fan at the *Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn Part 2* movie premiere held a sign reading, “Rob, you are my life now” (www.gofugyourself.com, November 13, 2012). These two incidents, along with abundant sales of *Twilight* fan products (including shirts reading, “Edward [Pattinson’s character] ruined it for mortal men.”), demonstrate the powerful connection that fans of the *Twilight* series feel to both the actors who have taken on the lead roles and to the characters they play. Although these examples are isolated incidents of fan behaviors, they reflect a larger cultural phenomenon: fans’ romantic attachment to media figures.

In the previous chapters, I have established Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachments as common, motivated, measurable, and potentially consequential elements of adolescent psychosocial development. Chapter I provided a theoretical overview of the proposed model of ARPA and a general review of the relevant literature across three fields. Chapter II described a

series of focus groups in which women recalled their ARPA experiences, providing rich data about the practices, uses, and gratifications associated with these relationships. Building on this data, Chapter III described the development of a novel scale to quantitatively measure the strength of ARPA experiences. Finally, in Chapter IV, this scale was used to examine the relations between ARPAs and later romantic beliefs and assessments, revealing potentially detrimental effects on self-esteem, sexual self-evaluation, and traditional gender role endorsement. The possibility of positive effects was also evident in these data, as seen through the experience of passionate love.

These findings, building on Social Cognitive approaches, indicate that ARPAs may be responsible for unique media effects. Evidence in previous literature suggests that strong parasocial attachment to media figures can influence interpretation of media narratives (Cohen, 2002), adoption of scripts, schemas and norms presented in media narratives (Rubin & Step, 2000), changes in attitudes and behavior following exposure to media narratives (Basil, 1996; Boon & Lomore, 2001), and idealization of future relationships (Burnett & Beto, 2000). Additionally, many authors have suggested that romantic parasocial relationships in adolescence could shape partner preferences or models of desired partners based on media depictions and ARPA targets (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990; Burnett & Beto, 2000; Lee, Fiske, Glick, & Chen, 2010; Tukachinsky, 2010). Evidence presented here aligns with these earlier findings and further provides support for the potential for Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachments to play a role in shaping not only scripts and schemas but also the ways in which those scripts and schemas influence self-evaluation and self-esteem.

The theoretical model of Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachment presented in Chapter I was constructed with several goals: a) to facilitate empirical examination of the ARPA

experience, b) to open avenues for future inquiry into relationship development, parasocial relationships, and media effects, and c) to encourage the serious consideration of this phenomenon as normatively experienced. Achievement of these goals broadens our understanding of media's role in adolescent development and provides opportunities for intervention and education. In arguing for the developmental significance of early romantic relationships and experiences in adolescence, Collins (2003) identified a key question to guide future research: "How and under what conditions do romantic relationships affect individual development?" Collins (2003) went on to call for exploration of interconnections and synergisms related to social context as a fruitful area for further research. Building on these suggestions, this dissertation poses the question, "How and under what circumstances do ARPAs affect individual development in conjunction with reciprocal romantic relationships?" and provides a foundation upon which to build future research.

### **Suggestions for ARPA Research**

More theoretical development and empirical research is needed to further define the experience of ARPA and its role in adolescent development. Specifically, it will be important to approach this topic from multiple methodological viewpoints and across populations in order to better understand what these relationships look like and how they fit into the larger process of adolescent development.

### **ARPA and Adolescent Development**

Often the focus of research on adolescent sexual socialization has been on problematic outcomes such as sexual risk taking (Bleakley, Hennessy, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2008), pregnancy (Chandra, Martino, Collins, Ellioult, Berry, Kanouse, & Miu, 2008), and patriarchal scripts and schemas (Kim et al., 2007; Kirsch & Murnen, 2015). However, there is increasing interest in the

promotion of pro-social media effects in adolescence (see Keller & Brown, 2002) and in positive developmental outcomes that may result from early romantic relationships (Collins et al., 2009).

It is possible to imagine both adaptive and maladaptive functions of ARPA. As a normative part of adolescence, romantic parasocial relationships have the potential to positively affect development. If parasocial romantic relationships are the first step in the transition to dating, they may have similar effects on adolescents as early relationships. Positive emotions from early romantic relationships are associated with open-mindedness, perseverance, self-confidence, self-esteem, and social confidence (Collins et al., 2009; Larson et al., 1999). Like these early reciprocal relationships, parasocial romantic relationships likely also influence identity through the safe exploration of romantic identity and the ways in which parasocial romantic relationships and romantic socialization relate to other areas of development such as family and peer relationships and career aspirations (Collins et al., 2009).

Conversely, the studies presented here suggest that parasocial romantic relationships in adolescence are likely to be associated with maladaptive developmental outcomes. As in mutual interpersonal relationships, attributes of the romantic partner or object of affection likely influence the quality of a relationship (Collins et al., 2009). Negative emotions experienced by adolescents during romantic relationships are associated with close-mindedness and depressive symptoms (Larson et al., 1999). Moreover, even when the emotional experience of a relationship is positive, adolescents can be blinded by love and unable to judge a situation or potential partner clearly (Larson et al., 1999). Being swept up in romance could lead to emulation or acceptance of risky or destructive behaviors (Boon & Lomore, 2001).

The content of the media consumed in association with the parasocial romantic relationship could also have negative outcomes for adolescents. Romantic content in the media

tends to focus on traditional gender roles, a common, heterosexual script, and romantic myths that reinforce an idealization and prioritization of romantic relationships over other relationships (Clasen, 2010; Florsheim, 2003). Media are full of representations of relationships that send mixed messages about sex, idealize romance, reinforce traditional gender roles, and present bad boys and rebels as ideal romantic partners (Florsheim, 2003). These messages may be especially strong for adolescents engaged in ARPAs. The drench hypothesis (Greenberg, 1988), which has received little support in studies of briefer parasocial interactions with media characters, may be redeemed in the context of ARPAs due to their sheer emotional profundity. The drench hypothesis holds that a few high-impact exposures, like those with ARPA figures, may have stronger and longer lasting effects than large quantities of general media exposure (Greenberg, 1988). For example, adolescents may face negative emotional outcomes ranging from disappointment and disillusionment to relational conflict when their interpersonal romantic experiences do not match the idealized scripts involved in their ARPAs (Larson et al., 1999). In the future, researchers will need to closely examine the nature of ARPAs, the contexts in which they occur, the adaptive and maladaptive functions they may play in adolescent development, and the way they interact with reciprocal romantic relationships in shaping emerging adults' romantic preferences and decisions.

### **Methodological Diversity**

This dissertation lays out a theoretical model for ARPA, provides a reliable and valid means of measuring these forms of attachment, which accounts for the cognitive, affective, and fantasy elements of ARPA, and examines cross-sectional survey data on romantic socialization and ARPA. However, as with much research on psychological development and media effects, the best way to measure the role that romantic parasocial attachments play in adolescent

development would be a longitudinal study beginning in early adolescence and running through early adulthood. A longitudinal approach would allow us to trace the romantic socialization process from first celebrity crushes to long-term committed reciprocal relationships and determine the interactive roles of interpersonal relationships, ARPA, and other contextual factors in the romantic developmental process.

Giles (2002) argues for increased attention to qualitative and ethnographic methodology in parasocial relationship research—emphasizing the importance of allowing audiences to speak to their own experiences and add depth to quantitative research findings. As such, it will also be essential to engage in further qualitative ethnographic research to provide the nuance in ARPA as a lived experience that cannot be easily captured in survey questions.

**Populations of interest.** Avoidance or minimization of physical and emotional risk is a key motivation for engagement in Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachments. Although it is likely that these attachments exist in some form for adolescent boys, they appear to be more ubiquitous and powerful in adolescent girls. As women are taught to be especially vigilant about these risks, celebrity relationships may be especially valuable for romantic praxis with minimal physical risk. For adolescent girls, major emphasis (and social pressure) is typically placed on the importance of being in love and having a romantic relationship (Simon et al., 1992). Adolescent girls are socialized into these relationships with media figures through norms of romantic attachment, femininity norms, and a focus on relationships in their social development (J. D. Brown et al., 1993; Ward & Friedman, 2006).

There are several additional populations for whom ARPAs may provide an especially common or powerful means of minimizing risk in romantic socialization. For example, ARPA may play a central role in romantic relational development is LGBTQ youth. Queer adolescents

face high emotional and social risks when entering romantic relationships in adolescence (Langenderfer-Magruder, Walls, Whitfield, Brown, & Barrett, 2016). ARPAs may provide a safe space to explore sexuality and also, depending on social or geographic context, provide objects of affection when local options for exploring these early attachments are limited or prohibited. Early experimentation with celebrity attachment may be an especially attractive means of managing both physical and reputational risk for LGBTQ youth entering the worlds of dating, sex, and romance.

It will also be fruitful to examine how different social and ethnic groups engage with and are engaged by ARPAs. For example, does the fact that most media idols in the U.S. are white make the ARPA experience more or less central to the development of adolescents of color? In cultures where the norms of dating and romance differ from those of the U.S. and other Westernized countries, do ARPAs assume a different form or role in development? Are there cultures where ARPAs are especially prevalent or entirely absent? All of these questions are ripe for researchers wishing to apply the ARPA model.

### **The Lived Experience of ARPA**

Finally, understanding how ARPAs function and what practices, beliefs, and experiences are associated with them will be important in determining their role across these populations of interest. Several key questions present themselves regarding the nature of ARPA as lived experiences. It is widely recognized that social and physical attraction play a major role in catalyzing parasocial relationships in general (Rubin & Step, 2000), but the specific developmental stage and romantic nature of ARPA experiences may relate to differences in how the relationships are initially formed and then deepened. Specifically, individual celebrities or types of celebrities may be particularly attractive at certain moments in development (Karniol,

2001), and, attraction to these celebrities may change over time as young women mature sexually and gather reciprocal relationship experiences. It is also important to understand if, how, and when these relationships end and whether their nature shifts across the lifespan. Cohen (2003) has examined the break-up of parasocial relationships generally; understanding when and how ARPAs end will provide insight into their necessity, and the causes of their subsequent obsolescence, in the course of an adolescent's development.

We also need to better understand how media figures become targets of these attachments. As Collins (2003) points out, context is central to the development of romantic relationships in adolescence, and a major source of context for relationships is the nature of the romantic partner. Celebrities are media productions, designed to promote emotional relationships by facilitating viewership and loyalty (Giles, 2000; Horton & Wohl, 1956). Additionally, the emergence of social media has changed the media context in which ARPAs occur. Does the fact that social media make celebrities seem more accessible (e.g., when celebrity posts are interspersed with friends' posts on Instagram) change adolescent relationships with these figures? Does the occasional recognition by a celebrity through social media—as when a media figure responds to a fan's tweet on Twitter—take the lived experience of ARPAs to another realm?

### **Conclusion**

Adolescence is a time of great transition, particularly when it comes to the shifting nature of relationships with peers and parents and the emergence of romantic relationships (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Young adolescents enter the dating world as novices with limited knowledge and experience of romance or sex (Collins, 2003). Often, early romantic relationships are described as superficial and transitory and dismissed as trivial. However, early relationships are not always as trivial or transitory as portrayed, and, even when they are, they are still important moments in

adolescent development (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Beginning to consider and explore romantic relationships can be a highly stressful experience for adolescents, and their early experiences with romance can influence developmental outcomes both within and beyond the scope of romantic relationships (Karniol, 2001; Shulman & Seiffe-Krenke, 2001). Media, by providing a safe context in which to explore identity, emotion, and sexuality, can be an important source of information and vicarious experience to help with this transition (Greene & Adams-Price, 1990; Karniol, 2001; Ward, 2003).

ARPAs are a developmentally normative, ubiquitous experience and may play an important and even essential role in the trajectory of modern adolescent romantic and sexual development (B. B. Brown, 1999). However, these relationships are also commercially driven and, in many ways, controlled by media industries. It is important to remember that whereas other socialization agents such as parents or peers are often assumed to have the adolescent's best interest at heart, media are primarily interested in financial gain and are thus not necessarily motivated to present representations designed to maximize positive developmental outcomes (Arnett, 1995). Many media characters and figures targeted to young audiences are marketed as human fantasies designed to induce parasocial romance (Aubrey et al., 2010). Caughey (1984) and Horton and Wohl (1956) similarly argue that media attempt to package and manipulate the parasocial experience to capture audiences through camera angles, illusions of intimacy, and engagement of audience members' social or cultural identities. In recent years, the power of ARPAs may be stronger than ever due to the convergence of media outlets and narratives and the presence of celebrities, both in character and as themselves, on social media sites such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

In her seminal work on romance readers, Radway (1991) argued for the separation of media content from media practices in audience analysis. Before we can begin to understand the role of specific media content within ARPAs, we must first understand the practices associated with the relationships, by examining their common features and exploring how they fit into adolescent development. Since media are powerful socialization agents and celebrity culture saturates the daily lives of adolescents, it is essential that we understand how adolescents' interactions with media figures, specifically romantic parasocial relationships, may influence adolescent development. This dissertation provides a lens through which developmentally inclined researchers can make sense of these relationships in all their complexity and begin to consider the role that ARPA experiences play in the lives of many adolescents.

## **APPENDICES**

## APPENDIX A

### Focus Group Interview Questions and Guidelines

**Project Title:**

Teenage Dreams: Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachments to Media Figures–Theory, Processes and Effects

**Research Questions:**

- RQ1: What uses and gratifications do teens derive from romantic attachment to media personae (developmentally, emotionally, cognitively)?
- RQ2: How do teens experience and understand these relationships over time?
- RQ3: What effect do parasocial romantic relationships have on adolescent sexual socialization?  
3a: When are these relationships adaptive? Maladaptive?

**Pre-Test Questionnaire:**

Participants will complete an online survey in which they will describe their experiences of romantic attachment to media figures in adolescence. From these surveys, I will build focus groups composed of participants with similar attachment experiences.

**FOCUS GROUP SESSION:****Introduction:**

Hello everyone! Today we are going to be discussing your experiences having crushes on celebrities when you were younger, specifically when you were in 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade (or ages 12-14 or so). You were all selected to participate because you have had these experiences and you have been put together today because I believe your experiences relate well to each other.

Before we get started, a couple of ground rules.

1. Everything you say in this room is confidential. No one here will share anything said in this room after we leave the session. When I analyze our conversation and write it up for publication (along with all of my other focus groups), I will change all of your names and any quotes will be completely anonymous.
2. We are taping this focus group with video and audio recorders. This is for my records and to help me analyze data later.
3. This conversation is meant to be a time for sharing your own experiences without judgment from anyone else. In this vein, we will all be respectful of each other and allow other participants to speak. If you disagree with someone, disagree with their statement but not their personality or their experience.

4. Let's have fun! Talking about celebrities and our own crushes is fun and interesting and I want this session to be fun and interesting as well.

Participants read and sign consent forms.

**Warm-Up Questions:**

1. Let's start by talking a bit about your media habits as a teen. How often did you watch TV? How many hours a week? What shows did you like the most? The least?
2. What about movies? Favorite movies from your teens?
3. Books? Magazines?
4. How did you spend your time in middle school and high school?

**Romantic Parasocial Attachment Questions:**

Optional prompts/warm ups: talk about my own experiences, ask them about their friends experiences (that they may have observed)

To begin, I'd like everyone to tell us a little bit about their media crushes. You have your survey in front of you, take a moment to look it over and then we can get started.

First, tell us who you had a crush on and how old you were when the crush started. (go around the room)

Now, what was it about this person that initially drew you to him? How did it start?

What was your favorite thing about your crush?

Note: these questions/sections may occur in different orders depending on the group and what is covered in the introductions. (also, as a prompt, can always turn to own experiences or friend experiences)

*Behaviors:*

1. Viewing/interacting with media figure: When? How often? With whom?
2. Consumer behavior: buying media itself, buying products/merchandise, going to events, reading books/magazines
3. Creative expression: drawing, art, stories, doodles, decorating (locker, backpack, walls, etc), fan fiction
4. Friendship/bonding: social rituals, viewing parties, talking with friends, same or different targets as friends? How did you talk about the media figures?
  - a. How did your friends contribute to why you had the crush or how strong it was?
5. Conventions, cosplay, costume
6. Personal reflection – journals, diaries
7. Internet

*Cognitions:*

1. Thoughts/fantasies : daydreams, thinking about narrative when not watching, dreaming about narrative/character, concern about character/media figure
2. Did you ever spend time daydreaming about your crush? What did you daydream about?
3. Do you think you idealized this media figure? In what ways?
4. How did you think about your relationship then? What do you think when you think about it now?
5. Comparison to your own life, romantic experiences, peers
6. Social norms – why was target attractive? How was your relationship like a real relationship? What sort of ideas about relationships did you get from your celebrity crush?
7. Initial thoughts/reactions about target, changing thoughts over time

*Emotions:*

1. Feelings of attachment
2. Intensity of feelings, changing intensity over time
3. Valence of feelings - positive, negative, changing over time
4. Satisfaction/needs met by relationship – WHY have this relationship? How did it make you feel about romance? Life?
5. Temporal variation of emotions
6. Understanding of emotions (Then and now)

Some of you have mentioned fictional characters and others have focused more on celebrities...for those of you who mentioned fictional characters, how did you feel about the actor who played these roles? How similar to the character do you think he/she is?

How has the internet played a role in your celebrity relationships? (twitter, fb, myspace)

*Reflection:*

Have you thought much about this crush since it ended (if it has)? What have you thought about?

Have you ever compared your crush to current/past romantic partners or previous crushes?

Has the type of person you are attracted to changed since you had this crush? How?

Do you think the crush impacted who you are attracted to?

Are you happy you had these relationships?

Do they matter to you now?

How have they impacted your later relationships? Feelings about romance?

**Possible Negatives, Reactions of others**

Did your parents know about your crush? How did they react?

Did other people know about your crush? How did they react?

What negative consequences did you experience as a result of this relationship? (teasing, belittling of fans in general, dismissal of media object, etc)

How did these things change your relationship with your crush?

**Final stages of the crush**

When did your crush end? Has it ended?

What caused the end of your crush on this media figure?

Have you had other crushes since then? Has this crush been replaced?

**Points of Comparison**

Were there other media figures or characters that you specifically were not attracted to when you were in 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade?

What was it about them that was unattractive?

**Final Question:**

Knowing what you know from 102 about media effects and thinking about your own experiences, how do you react today when you see teens with strong attachments to media figures? Are you concerned? Fine? Excited for them?

How might these relationships help teens? Hurt them?

How have social networks, the Internet and new media changed these relationships?

**Final thoughts:**

Each participant will be asked to write down final thoughts they want to share before leaving.

Then, they will be debriefed and informed that they can follow up with me via email if they have additional comments or questions or want to change any of their responses.

## APPENDIX B

### Full list of original ARPA items

When something good happened to this person, I felt good too.

**When something bad happened to this person, it upset me.**

I preferred this person to be single and did not like when they dated.

I often disliked this person's romantic partners.

Above all, I wanted this person to be happy in life.

I would get angry at anyone who hurt this person.

Sometimes, I would watch or listen to this person to escape into a fantasy.

I wanted to be as close (emotionally) to this person as possible.

I bought products (books, magazines, posters, t-shirts etc) that featured this person.

I sometimes made videos, art, or stories that featured this person.

I made websites, memes, photo-stitches or other digital creations about this person.

I put images of this person places I would see them (posters on the wall, phone backgrounds, etc).

If I had a chance to meet this person, I would have done anything to make it happen.

I often attended events (concerts, tapings, book signings) where I knew this person would be present.

When watching or listening to this person, I would sometimes yell or scream in delight.

The idea of seeing this person in real life made me giddy.

I would yell and scream if I met this person in real life.

My friends and family thought I was "obsessed" with this person.

I was obsessed with this person.

I would watch/listen to media featuring this person over and over again.

I entered contests to meet this person.

I prioritized this person over my friendships.

I prioritized this person over my family.

I thought this person was very physically attractive.

I thought this person was hot.

I thought this person was sexy.

**I wanted to know as much as I could about this person.**

**I felt as though this person and I had a lot in common.**

This person shared my interests.

This person shared my values.

I thought this person was extremely talented.

I idealized this person as the perfect man/woman.

**I wanted to help support this person's career.**

**I often daydreamed about this person.**

I imagined what it would be like to meet this person.

**I imagined that this person would someday pick me out of a crowd and see me as special.**

**My relationship with this person made me feel happy.**

Whenever I saw this person in the media, I felt excited.

When I saw this person in the media, my heart rate increased.

When bad things happened to this person, it upset me.

**When good things happened to this person, I was excited.**

I sometimes felt nervous for this person.

I would get angry at anyone who hurt this person.

I often got angry when friends or peers would say they didn't like this person.

I often made new friends because I liked this person.

I sought out friends who also liked this person.

I paid attention to where this person would go/eat/hang out and what they would do.

My friends and I bonded over liking this person.

I learned new skills (language, website design, drawing, etc) to express my fandom for this person.

I followed or liked this person on social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, MySpace).

**I imagined conversations I would have with this person if we ever met.**

**I imagined what it would be like to marry this person.**

I imagined my wedding to this person.

I looked for romantic partners with the same traits as this person.

Sometimes, I compared my real life romantic partners to this person.

My feelings for this person interfered with my "real life" relationships.

I had a hard time separating the portrayal of this person in the media from their true identity.

I thought this person was just like he/she was portrayed in the media.

I looked for friends with the same traits as this person.

This person was just "my type."

This person was an example of how all men/women should be in relationships.

I learned what I wanted in a romantic relationship from this person.

I sometimes fell behind on my schoolwork because of my relationship with this person.

I often neglected my schoolwork in favor of watching videos of or listening to this person.

I would have gone to an event to meet this person, even if I had something important the next morning.

I considered this person part of my life.

I considered this person part of my identity.

I wanted to be like the people this person dated.

I wanted to be like people in this person's life in the hope that he/she might notice me.

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