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VIRTUAL BONDS IN THE AESTHETIC REALM: PARASOCIAL INTERACTIONS WITH TIKTOK INFLUENCERS ON YOUNG ADULTS' WELL-BEING

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ABSTRACT

Indonesia has become the highest country with the most TikTok users at 157.6 million users. The highest social media users are held by early adulthood because they are still in the exploration stage, forming identity, and are susceptible to the influence of self-care content aimed at achieving the desired appearance. As interest in aesthetics and TikTok usage increases, influencers are becoming more prominent. Social media users often feel connected to influencers, considering them authentic and relevant to their interests. The more 'similarities', the higher the chance that individuals will perceive a meaningful relationship with the influencer. Having a meaningful relationship and strong positive emotional bonds are closely related to a person's subjective well-being. This study aims to identify the relationship between parasocial interactions with favourite TikTok influencers and the subjective well-being of early adults in the aesthetics industry. The study used a parasocial interaction scale based on Horton and Wohl theory, the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), and the Positive Affect and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS). Data collection was carried out online using a nonprobability sampling technique with purposive and snowball sampling methods. The study participants consisted of 423 participants who were in early adulthood. The results of the study showed that parasocial interaction has a significant weak positive relationship with subjective well-being ($r = .127$, $p < .05$). This means that the higher the parasocial interaction, the higher the individual's subjective well-being.

Keywords: *parasocial interaction, subjective well-being, tiktok influencers*

1. PREFACE

In August 2024, Indonesia officially became the first ranked country with the most TikTok users in the world. TikTok users in Indonesia have reached 157.6 million people, with 54 million people aged 18-25 years (Udescu, 2023). TikTok has beaten other social media because it has a unique algorithm and adapts to its users' preferences (Tim, 2024). The development period of early adulthood is in a transition period from late adolescence to early adulthood which is marked by experimentation and exploration (Santrock, 2012). TikTok during this development period has been used as a means of education, e-commerce, and activism. In addition, the #SelfCare hashtag trend on TikTok has had 13.5 million posts about self-care content. With that, influencers in the aesthetic industry are using TikTok to create content around products, routines, and tutorials.

However, in the digital era, excessive use of social media can have negative impacts. According to Krisnadi and Adhandayani (2022), increased use of social media is characterised by loneliness which is also high by 46.8%. Loneliness at this age has been shown to increase the intensity of online interactions carried out by individuals on social media (Kim et al., 2023). In addition, excessive use of social media can also affect mood swings and ultimately affect daily life (Bányai et al., 2017). Constant exposure to TikTok can trigger the negative impact of instant gratification from media which causes stress, fatigue, and decreased direct social interaction (Twenge, 2017; Dhir & Tsai, 2017). With high exposure to social media, users will enjoy a lot of

influencer's content. Influencers are ordinary individuals who showcase their work and have a strong passion for their field. Because influencers come from ordinary backgrounds, users tend to feel a greater sense of "similarity" and connection compared to traditional celebrities (Kim & Kim, 2022). Moreover, social media provides a virtual space for users to interact with their favorite influencers, allowing them to develop emotional bonds (Chung & Cho, 2017). This is one of the factors contributing to the rise of parasocial interactions between individuals and users (Stein et al., 2024).

Parasocial interaction is a phenomenon where users feel as though a celebrity is communicating directly with them and perceive a personal interaction (Levy, 1979). Interactive features on social media increase the likelihood of users developing parasocial interactions with influencers, as they can generate positive emotions such as happiness and satisfaction in real life (Kim & Kim, 2020). These interactive features foster closeness, social focus, and self-disclosure (Chung & Cho, 2017). The positive emotions formed and the need for meaningful relationships are directly linked to an individual's subjective well-being (Hartmann, 2016). Individuals develop interactive relationships with media figures not only to build intimacy but also to fulfill Erikson's psychosocial developmental tasks (Nawardi et al., 2020). To create meaningful relationships, individuals tend to be motivated to do what was done by other people (Apolo & Kurniawati, 2023). Subjective well-being is an individual's psychological state encompassing life satisfaction, high levels of positive affect, and low levels of negative affect (Diener et al., 1997). According to Schramm (2019), parasocial interaction can also impact relaxation levels and reduce emotional stress.

Research by Kim and Kim (2022) shows a positive relationship between parasocial interaction and subjective well-being, which influences perceptions of friendship and real-life well-being. Besides the positive relationship, parasocial interaction can also negatively impact individuals, such as causing emotional dependency, dissatisfaction with real life, and increased feelings of loneliness (Hartmann, 2016). To date, most research on parasocial interaction focuses on mass media such as television. Therefore, based on the phenomenon, diverse research findings, and the target media to be studied, this research aims to identify the relationship between parasocial interaction and individuals' subjective well-being in the aesthetic industry.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

Samples

This study employed a non-probability sampling technique using purposive and snowball sampling methods. The criteria for participants included individuals aged 18-25, active TikTok users, and having a favourite influencer in the aesthetic industry. Data collection was conducted online through Google Forms distributed to potential participants. The study involved 423 respondents who met the required criteria. Participants were categorised into four groups: gender, age, daily TikTok usage duration, and current activities. Details are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Participants Characteristics

No	*Aspects*		*Number of Participants*	*Percentage*
1.	Gender	Male	30	7.1
		Female	193	92.9
		Total	**423**	**100**
2.	Age	18 years	98	23.2
		19 years	96	22.7
		20 years	72	17

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		21 years	96	22.7
		22 years	37	8.7
		23 years	18	4.3
		24 years	5	1.2
		25 years	1	0.2
		Total	**423**	**100**
3.	Tiktok Duration per Day	<1 hour	26	6.1
		1 - 2 hours	105	13.7
		2 - 3 hours	133	31.4
		3 - 4 hours	101	23.9
		>5 hours	58	13.7
		Total	**423**	**100**
4.	Activity	College	378	89.4
		Work	34	8
		Internship	9	2.1
		Self Development	1	0.2
		Others	1	0.2
		Total	**423**	**100**

Measurement

The parasocial interaction measurement used in this study was developed by Oelfy (2015), based on the parasocial interaction theory of Horton and Wohl (1985). The scale consists of three dimensions; illusion of intimacy, role of the figure, and perceived similarity. It contains 35 items, with 33 positive items and 2 negative items. The tool uses a Likert scale model with four options such as strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree. Higher respondent scores indicate stronger parasocial interaction, while lower scores indicate weaker parasocial interaction. According to Hinton et al. (2004), a reliability level of 0.7-0.9 is considered high. The researcher tested the reliability of each dimension and the validity of the items using Cronbach's alpha method. The Cronbach's alpha results showed high reliability for all dimensions, as detailed in Table 2.

Table 2

Parasocial Interaction Scale Reliability

Dimensions	***Cronbach's Alpha***	**Category**
Illusion of Intimacy	0.888	High
Role of The Figure	0.870	High
Perceived Similarity	0.783	High

The subjective well-being measurement tools used were the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) by Diener and the Positive Affect and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) by Watson and Tellegen, translated and adapted by Akhtar (2019). SWLS measures the life satisfaction dimension through five items using a Likert scale ranging from 1-5. Higher scores indicate higher life satisfaction. Meanwhile, PANAS measures positive and negative effects, consisting of 10 positive items and 10 negative items. The researcher tested the reliability of each dimension and the validity of the items using Cronbach's alpha method. The Cronbach's alpha results indicated high reliability for all dimensions, as detailed in Table 3.

Table 3
SWLS and PANAS Reliability

Dimensions	*Cronbach's Alpha*	Catregory
Satisfaction with life	0.840	High
Positive Affect	0.826	High
Negative Affect	0.832	High

Thus, the measurement tools for assessing parasocial interaction and subjective well-being can be used, as all show high reliability above 0.8.

Data collection and analysis
This study employed a quantitative method. Data collection was conducted by distributing questionnaires online via Google Forms links. The questionnaire links were shared by the researcher through various social media platforms to attract participants meeting the research criteria. The measurement tools underwent expert judgement and pilot testing. The questionnaire included informed consent for participants before they decided to fill it out. After the required number of participants was met, the data was processed using SPSS version 25.0 to analyse hypotheses and Microsoft Excel to calculate data frequencies.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Overview of Parasocial Interaction and Subjective Well-Being
To understand the overview of individuals' parasocial interaction and subjective well-being, the researcher used hypothetical and empirical means. For the parasocial interaction measurement tool, with a Likert scale of 1 to 4, the hypothetical mean is 2.5, while the empirical mean in this study is 2.79. For the subjective well-being measurement tool, SWLS uses a Likert scale of 1 to 5, and PANAS uses a Likert scale of 1 to 7. Thus, the hypothetical mean for subjective well-being is 3.5, while the empirical mean in this study is 3.67.

Table 4
Overview of Parasocial Interaction and Subjective Well-Being

No	*Variable*	*Hypothetical Mean*	*Empirical Mean*	*Category*
1	*Parasocial Interaction*	2.5	2.79	High
2	*Subjective Well-Being*	3.5	3.67	High

Based on the table above, it shows that the levels of parasocial interaction (m = 2.79) and subjective well-being (m = 3.67) fall into the high category.

Normality Test for Parasocial Interaction and Subjective Well-Being
The researcher conducted a normality test to determine the data processing method. The normality analysis was performed using SPSS version 25.0 for Windows with the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test.

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Table 5
Normality Test for Parasocial Interaction and Subjective Well-Being

Variable	***Sig. (2-tailed)***	***Category***
Unstandardized Residual	.200	Normal Distributed

Based on the normality test results, the significance value of the residual data for the variables is .200. Therefore, it can be concluded that the data is normally distributed ($p > 0.05$).

Hypothesis Test Between Variables
With normally distributed data, the hypothesis test used Pearson's correlation. The results showed a positive correlation between parasocial interaction and subjective well-being.

Table 6
Pearson's Correlation Between Variables

Pearson	***Parasocial Interaction and Subjective Well-Being***
Correlation Coefficient	.127
Sig. (2-tailed)	.009

Based on Table 6, there is a significant positive relationship between the two variables ($r = .127$, $p < 0.05$). The correlation coefficient is only .127 which means that parasocial interactions have weak positive correlation with subjective well-being. This indicates that an increase in parasocial interaction leads to higher subjective well-being, and vice versa. But the contribution of parasocial interaction for higher subjective well-being is very minor.These findings align with Kim and Kim's (2022) study, which also showed a positive relationship between the variables. Parasocial interaction has been proven to influence happiness and satisfaction (Hartmann, 2016). This occurs because merely observing media figures can evoke a feeling of perceived positive support from the figure. Such perceived support resembles real-life support, enhancing positive emotions (Lakey et al., 2014). Additionally, direct parasocial interaction with media figures significantly enhances well-being by providing emotional support through personalised content or messages and fostering a sense of closeness and comfort (Kim et al., 2023).

Although it can give a positive impact, the weak positive correlation between parasocial interaction and subjective well-being shows that parasocial interaction does not make a major contribution to an individual's subjective well-being. The effects that parasocial interactions have on subjective well-being are temporary and only make someone feel better in the short term after interacting with their favorite media figures (Stein et al., 2024). This happens because parasocial interactions do not have the same emotional depth that real social relationships create. Real relationships allow for mutual support, trust, and deeper shared experiences, which parasocial interactions cannot provide (Wang & Shang, 2024).

Variable Differences in Parasocial Interaction
The researcher also conducted a comparative analysis of parasocial interaction variables based on factors such as gender, age, TikTok usage duration, and ongoing activities.

Table 7
Variable Differences in Parasocial Interaction

No	***Aspects***		***Mean***	***F***	***P***
1.	Gender	Male	2.82	6.838	.012
		Female	2.62		
2.	Age	18 years	2.83	.401	.901
		19 years	2.77		
		20 years	2.8		
		21 years	2.84		
		22 years	2.87		
		23 years	2.85		
		24 years	2.65		
		25 years	2.94		
3.	TikTok Duration per Day	<1 hour	2.8	2.586	.037
		1 - 2 hours	2.75		
		2 - 3 hours	2.77		
		3 - 4 hours	2.91		
		>5 hours	2.88		
4.	Activity	College	2.82	0.705	.589
		Work	2.8		
		Intern	2.58		
		Self Development	2.57		
		Other	2.85		

Based on Table 7, parasocial interaction shows significant differences when viewed from gender ($p < 0.05$), with females exhibiting higher parasocial interaction ($m = 2.82$) compared to males ($m = 2.62$). Parasocial interaction also differs significantly based on TikTok usage duration ($p = 0.037$ 0.05), with individuals using TikTok for 3-4 hours per day showing the highest parasocial interaction ($m = 2.91$) compared to other durations. However, no significant differences were found based on age and ongoing activities ($p > 0.05$).

Regarding gender, females tend to have higher parasocial interaction levels than males. This finding aligns with Wasike's (2018) study, which found that females exhibit higher parasocial interaction, especially with female models. Females are more likely to develop parasocial interactions due to their preoccupied attachment style, being more responsive to physical attraction and emotional engagement (Wasike, 2018). In contrast, males tend to develop parasocial interaction when experiencing chronic loneliness (Wang et al., 2008). Males are more prone to anxiety in relationships due to societal norms that portray females as more skilled in relationships (Acitelli & Muda, 1996).

Regarding TikTok usage duration, individuals who use TikTok for 3-4 hours daily tend to exhibit the highest parasocial interaction levels. This finding is consistent with Chung and Cho's (2017) study, which states that the more intense social media interaction is, the greater the likelihood of parasocial interaction. Frequent online engagement increases the likelihood of longer social media usage. Continuous exposure to social media enables individuals to feel closer and more connected to media figures (Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016).

However, parasocial interaction does not show significant differences when viewed by age or ongoing activities. Age does not influence parasocial interaction because social media usage can occur at any age. Various factors, such as excessive media consumption, real-world social limitations, and attachment to specific events or media figures, can influence the intensity of parasocial interaction regardless of age (Schramm & Liebers, 2019). Similarly, ongoing activities in real life do not determine parasocial interaction. Instead, it depends on virtual activities, such

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as consistently following, waiting for, and enjoying media figures' content, which has been proven to increase parasocial interaction (Widiastuti et al., 2020).

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study found a weak yet significant positive correlation between parasocial interaction and subjective well-being. While engaging with influencers on TikTok may provide temporary emotional benefits, such as positive affect and entertainment, these effects are not deep or long-lasting. The findings align with previous research indicating that parasocial relationships can enhance mood and offer a sense of connection. However, these benefits remain superficial compared to real-life social relationships.

Importantly, subjective well-being is more strongly influenced by genuine social interactions, which provide deeper emotional support, reciprocal communication, and long-term psychological fulfillment. Unlike parasocial relationships, real social bonds foster meaningful connections, trust, and shared experiences that significantly contribute to overall life satisfaction. Studies have shown that while parasocial interactions may offer momentary comfort, they cannot replace the emotional depth and security of real-life relationships.

Thus, while parasocial interactions can be a supplemental source of positive emotions, they should not be relied upon as a primary means of achieving well-being. Instead, individuals should prioritize real-world social connections, which play a far more critical role in sustaining long-term happiness and emotional health. Based on the research conducted, the researcher proposes some theoretical and practical suggestions for consideration in future research.

a. Future research should dive deeper into the theory of parasocial interaction in the influencer industry, exploring each influencing aspect such as age, gender, TikTok duration per day, and activity more extensively;
b. Future research should consider other factors that may influence parasocial interaction, such as personality traits;
c. Additionally, future studies could delve deeper into the types of content and interactions with influencers to gain better insights into healthy social media use.

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