



**Linnæus University**

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Master Thesis

# Exploring Parasocial Relationships Formed in Isolation



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## Abstract

A few years ago Covid-19 locked people down at their homes, effectively limiting their social connections and pushing the communicative outlet of the online realm in the forefront. If one wanted to socialize or seek entertainment, there was almost no other choice but to do so via turning to popular or social media. However, with the newly increased frequency of exposure came the question of whether there was also a change in the formation of parasocial relationships formed in isolation and this thesis explores the meaningfulness and longevity of such connections, tracing them before, during and after the pandemic. It also makes note of phenomena such as loneliness, parasocial romance and parasocial breakup, additionally examining the degree of attachment formed to media figures during isolation, as well as their relevance to the public. To achieve that, the empirical portion of this study consists of a survey in which 114 participants had to answer questions relating to isolation and parasocial behaviour. Additionally, for the purposes of the thesis two social media creators were contacted for interviews and were asked to share their views on parasocial interactions and attachments as they observed them in isolation from the other side of the connection. On the basis of previously existing separate research in parasocial relations and isolation six hypotheses were formed in this thesis relating to people's online activity, perceived loneliness and financial generosity, as well as the degree of relatability and attachment they felt towards media personae.

**Disclaimer:** The following thesis contains discussions relating to physical and/or mental health issues including references to the Covid-19 pandemic, which might be uncomfortable or triggering to some readers. The author of this thesis is not a licensed practitioner in the field of Psychology and the analysis provided will be based on an observational basis informed by material already present in the field. This thesis is for academic purposes only and should not be construed as medical advice.

## Keywords

Parasocial interaction, parasocial relationship, isolation, Covid-19, Coronavirus, loneliness, parasocial breakup, parasocial romance, parasocial monetization, attachment theory, parasocial attachment, Bulgaria

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Appendix 1: Survey Questions



Appendix 2: Interview Questions

## Abbreviations

LEE	Lived experience expert
PSA	Parasocial attachment
PSBR	Parasocial breakup
PSI	Parasocial interactions
PSR	Parasocial relationships
PSROM	Parasocial romance



# 1 Introduction

The online world has become a place of comfort for all kinds of people, allowing them to meet others dwelling within the same digital bubble. With the help of online communication, one could now find a community of like-minded people, form friendships and even pursue a romantic interest without leaving home. But albeit conceptually similar, the phrases “to connect” and “to bond” are not synonymous, since while the Internet offers the possibility to establish a connection, there is no guarantee that the sentiment will be mutually meaningful. This is especially relevant for figures like celebrities or influencers who exist as an exclusively digital presence in the lives of users, and forming attachments to them is known as a parasocial phenomenon. Yet, while connecting digitally and engaging in parasocial interactions has become increasingly normalized, not every modern person would be interested in engaging in such behaviour, with many favouring in-person interactions instead. That is unless the circumstances drastically changed.

With the Covid-19 pandemic imposing a large-scale mandatory isolation, it affected individuals of all ages and social backgrounds by effectively eliminating real-life social interactions for extended periods of time. Health and vigilance became first global priorities, thus pushing the concepts of socialization and communication into the realm of the digital where one’s physical safety was guaranteed. During Covid-19 the safe haven of the Internet welcomed those who had no other choice but to socialize online and share the global experience of self-isolation and loneliness together. But how did that affect the parasocial realm? Did the lack of real-life socialization push more people into forming one-sided connections to digitally-existing figures or was there no impact at all?

This thesis aims at exploring the meaningfulness and longevity of parasocial connections formed during and after isolation. While plenty of research in relation to the different effects of the Covid-19 pandemic has been conducted, especially in terms of socialization, the parasocial aspect was not that widely covered. The first part of the data used in this study was collected by mainly surveying participants based in Bulgaria, although some international presence was also noted. Research regarding the different effects of Covid-19 in Bulgaria can be found, but there are no records of the parasocial aspect of it, even when the country experienced several extended lockdowns and the usage of digital media for communicative purposes surged. The data collected for the second part of this thesis presents interview pieces of individuals on the receiving end of the parasocial spectrum, to see how their experiences compared to the notions shared by regular users.

# 2 Background

The term parasocial relationship (PSR) was first coined by Horton and Wohl in 1956 to describe a relationship of perceived closeness exhibited by the audiences of mass media content in connection to the individuals who appear there. A key characteristic of PSRs is the lack of reciprocity to one’s feelings, as mass media at the time only allowed for the formation of a one-sided connection, with figures



appearing only on television screens or in radio programs. Normal people would see these personae every single day, and Auter (1992) argued that this frequency of exposure was important for the development of stronger feelings towards media personalities, as it altered their perception of closeness to them. By enjoying popular media on a frequent basis, viewers were “inviting” media personae into their lives and homes, thus playing into a manufactured illusion of closeness (Horton & Wohl, 1956). As media creators became more aware of the formation of PSRs, they started using them as a way to keep audiences engaged and entertained, sometimes even referring to them directly. The formation of PSRs was seen as a benefit to all parties, with audiences remaining satisfied while media personae appreciated the attention, and media channels profited from the heightened engagement. Ballantine and Martin (2005) also noted that televised content in particular bore familiarity to interpersonal connections, and referred to a previous study by Alperstein (1999) who argued that this led viewers into entering an imaginary social world. This interpersonal nature of PSRs was also recognized as a successful marketing approach to sell merchandise – as it was in the example of television shopping channel hosts who spoke directly to the audience and invited them to try out a product (Grant et al., 1991; Alperstein, 1999). In the current day, while television shopping channels still exist, their popularity has dwindled in comparison to marketers on the Internet, where advertisements are strategically placed on website pages and in co-occurrence with popular content such as videos, images and even music. Merchandise is often promoted or endorsed by celebrities, influencers or ordinary Internet users writing review testimonials of certain products, and Lueck (2015) suggested that influencer marketing in particular relies on the bonds formed through PSRs for the heightening of buyer interest. Lueck also added that by repeatedly sharing personal information about themselves, influencers and celebrities help strengthen the attachment and eventual trust that audiences develop towards them (2015). A contributing factor in the purchase of celebrity or influencer-endorsed products is the “wishful identification” exhibited by audiences, which Hoffner & Buchanan (2005) define as a desire to become alike with that specific persona by copying their way of being.

The frequency of perceived contact can also contribute to the development of romantic feelings and adoration towards complete strangers who maintain a low public profile, as Horton & Wohl (1956) pointed out was the case in a 1951 radio program titled *The Lonesome Gal*, the premise of which involved a female voice addressing the audience in a first-person manner. With amicable words the voice beckoned the “shy”, “withdrawn” and “lonely” men to find said Lonesome Gal so that they can seek comfort in each other, thus resulting in thousands of marriage proposals sent via letters to the radio program. As Horton & Wohl noted, the Lonesome Gal had made no mentions of her age, appearance or previous history, and solely existed as a soothing voice for her listeners – allowing them to imagine her however they pleased. Adam & Sizemore (2013) referred to the developing of such positive affect towards distant figures or personae as Parasocial Romance (PSROM), and compared it to real-life romantic relationships. According to them, the only difference between real-life romantic relationships and PSROM is in the lack of reciprocity, since otherwise both could involve affection, physical, sexual and other attraction, as well as passion and commitment. Hartmann (2016) also



found that strong personal attachments in PSR scenarios can result in the formation of negative emotions like indifference or antipathy.

PSRs and PSROM existed even before the appearance of television and radio, in the more traditional medium of books, and Liebers and Schramm (2017) argue that books provide an even more intimate look into the lives and thoughts of characters, letting the readers in on a deeper level, thus creating a higher propensity for the formation of PSRs. Hartmann (2016) also notes that fictional characters could include not only those seen in books and stories, but also drawn or animated personae. Engagement and commitment to them is perceived as real, similarly to the way PSR and PSROM connections relate to real-life individuals, and can serve as a self-soothing mechanism in times of hardship or distress (Rain & Mar, 2021; Stever, 2013).

Although Horton & Wohl (1956) argued that establishing real-life contact with the on-screen performer would cross the realm of a PSR, technological advancement saw a shift in the way such relationships were formed and perceived. Media personae can now return the sentiment to their audience with the use of social media live streaming platforms and chats, essentially opening the dimension of reciprocity in PSR scenarios. Kowert & Emory (2021) refer to PSIs through livestreams in particular as “one-and-a-half” sided connections, arguing that there is a chance for reciprocity for certain individuals, but no guarantee of it, since such interactions are normally shared by countless other viewers attending the live session. As an extension to this, digital communication allows for the formation of online communities through shared interests – either on a certain topic or due to having a collective affection towards a media persona. This sense of closeness and relatability fosters community affiliation between fans (Crawford et al., 2020), and the phenomenon can be observed in varying contexts across communicative mediums. It is especially apparent in the cases of live streamers or other online content creators whose dedicated fanbases communicate both with the media persona in question and between themselves (Kowert & Emory, 2021).

## 2.1 Terminology

### 2.1.1 Attachment

The formation of attachment to individuals who appear frequently before someone is an evolution-dictated behavior referred to as attachment theory, related to a pursued feeling of proximity and safety (Ainworth, 1978). Initial research into it focused on the relationship between infants and their caregivers, but throughout time the scope was expanded to observe the ways in which romantic attachments created the same sense of security for the parties in a reciprocal relationship, as argued by Shaver & Hazan (1987). They also noted that physical proximity was not a requirement for the formation of a sense of safety. The frequent appearance of media personae in addition to the intimacy at a distance they offered, could therefore create a sense of attachment and in extension – a sense of safety for the viewers, although not always (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Attachment theory was also explored in the context of social media presence and Stever (2013) noted that it is





possible for Internet users to develop Parasocial Attachment (PSA) stemming from the sense of security formed in PSRs.

### **2.1.2 Social isolation**

The United States National Institute of Health (2021) defines social isolation as the lack of social contacts and human interaction in one's daily life. It involves a physical or emotional disconnect from meaningful social interactions and relationships. Social isolation occurs when an individual experiences a lack of regular contact or engagement with others, leading to feelings of loneliness, alienation, and reduced social support. Factors which contribute to social isolation might include geographic distance, health conditions, limited social opportunities, or personal circumstances that hinder one's ability to participate in social activities. During the global Covid-19 pandemic social distancing was required for health and safety reasons, effectively leaving people isolated for an extended period of time. In a study conducted by Clair et al. (2021) it was found that young adults experienced the highest levels of isolation which affected their life satisfaction and contributed to the accumulation of stress. Clair et al. also mentioned the term "perceived isolation", which refers to the feeling of being isolated even in an environment which includes the physical presence of others.

### **2.1.3 Loneliness**

According to Hawkley & Cacioppo (2010), loneliness refers to the distressing feeling of being alone, and it is closer to the understanding of perceived social isolation rather than to social isolation itself. While one might choose to self-isolate and feel at peace being alone, loneliness is characterized by a sense of emptiness and sadness, which Weiss (1974) explains is a natural phenomenon. It can be triggered by various factors, such as a lack of close friends or family, changes in life circumstances, or a perceived mismatch between an individual's desired and actual social interactions. A person experiencing loneliness could also feel out of place in a social setting, despite the presence of people around them. Loneliness is a complex concept that can have significant impact on the mental and emotional well-being of individuals (Yanguas et al., 2018). Addressing loneliness often involves seeking out positive social interactions, building supportive relationships, and engaging in activities that foster a sense of connection and belonging.

### **2.1.4 Parasocial breakup**

Cohen (2003) notes that the dissolution or breakup of a PSR is a common phenomenon which, albeit not as impactful as a real-life breakup, can still instigate a feeling of sadness. Popular media is transitive in nature and the audience has grown accustomed to moving on without a certain television show or a book series, but Barbara & Dion (2000) argue that in some cases parasocial breakups (PSBR) can lead to serious psychological consequences. The reasons for the initiation of a PSBR could vary – from losing interest in a persona or the content they create, to feeling disappointed regarding their words or actions, and in some occasions a breakup can occur due to the death of a celebrity (Cohen & Hoffner, 2016). Reactions prior to a PSBR could vary depending on the depth of the parasocial



attachment that was previously established with a certain persona, but the feelings associated with a breakup are more commonly neutral or negative in nature.

### 3 Previous research

Plenty of research has been done to examine parasocial relationships in the context of social media, with different focal points. Reynolds (2022) for example tackles the parasocial angle in the formation of PSRs with online influencers, as opposed to attachments formed via traditional media, film and television only. A similar study was conducted earlier by Ackerman (2021), where PSIs were examined in a specific social media platform – Instagram, with an additional comparison drawn between celebrities and micro-celebrities or influencers, since they exhibit different degrees of recognizability and exposure. Kowert & Daniel (2021) also focused on a specific platform, Twitch, but instead examined PSRs exhibited in one of the more recent communicative mediums of the new time – livestreams. According to them, livestreams shifted the original definition of PSRs by adding a layer of possible, yet not always guaranteed, reciprocity. A more recent study on the effects of PSRs in live streaming was conducted by Cohen & Martin (2023), which concluded that second-hand PSR formation was also possible, as exhibited by viewers who did not interact directly with a streamer, but still felt involved through the streamer's interactions with other viewers.

Social isolation has also been widely covered in academia, even when considering the role Internet plays within it. In 2016 Allen studied the manifestation of certain personality traits in Internet users who experienced social isolation, finding that individuals with more agreeable personality traits were likely to browse the web on a more frequent basis. Later on, Lieberman & Schroeder (2019) explored the impacts of offline and online interactions from an interpersonal perspective, and found that online interactions helped in strengthening personal connections in the real world. More importantly, they added that interacting online has shown positive results in stress and anxiety relief, and individuals felt supported despite the other party not being physically present. With the topic of Covid-19 gaining relevancy and prominence, more recent studies have tackled the effects of the pandemic on different aspects of everyday life in isolation – from digital retailing (Dimitrova, 2021), to digital communication patterns (DeFilippis et al., 2022), digitally-held studies (Saha et al., 2023) and others.

However, research on PSIs formed in isolation is still ongoing and academic coverage on this specific sub-topic is scarce. At the onset of the pandemic's first wave, Jarzyna (2021) tackled PSIs in isolation, but due to the timeframe of the study's publishing, it only covered the formation of such bonds. The present thesis builds up on this existing research by adding the aspects of loyalty and longevity to PSRs formed in isolation to see whether they persist after the end of the pandemic. Most recently parasocial relationships in the context of Covid-19 have been tackled by Liu (2023), but the focus there was on the health and political aspects of the phenomenon, and the study was mainly targeted towards Chinese individuals. Although the main survey data used in the present thesis has a few participants from



Asia, its sample pool mainly includes participants from Europe, and more specifically from Bulgaria, allowing for the observation of PSIs in a different cultural setting. Additionally, some of the survey questions presented in this study will tackle the concept of parasocial monetization observed in isolation – a concept which, to the knowledge of the author of this study, has not been explored in academia so far.

## 4 Theoretical basis

The questions presented in the survey and expert interviews which form the empirical basis of this research were inspired by material in the field of Psychology aimed at observing and measuring parasocial behaviour. Questions related specifically to PSI were motivated by the 112-item PSI-Process Scale developed by Schramm & Hartmann (2008), which was found to be an effective measure of the cognitive, affective and behavioural responses towards media personae. A more-recent study developed by Garcia, Björk and Kazemitabar (2022) which developed the Multidimensional Measure of Parasocial Relationships (MMPR) was also used to formulate some of the questions relevant to the field of interest and served as a topical separation in the analysis section of this thesis. The original MMPR successfully measured the A(ffect) B(ehavior) C(ognition) D(ecision) of participants in a similarly-conducted survey, and although this thesis will not delve too deep into the models suggested by experts in the field, the analysis will be based on opinions made by Psychology professionals and will use the notions of A(ffect) B(ehavior) C(ognition) D(ecision) as guidance.

Questions relating to the aspect of loneliness were based on different studies in the fields of Psychology and Psychiatry, but and mainly used the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) drafted by Zimet et al. (1990) as a measure, which was initially developed for younger audiences but was successfully applied to older participants later on.

The interviews conducted with experts in the field adhered to methods and practices suggested previously by Taherdoost (2022) regarding the effective collection of academic data for analytic purposes.

All conclusions reached in this thesis will be made based on empirical observations with cross-examination of previously existing academic matter on the subjects of isolation, PSI and PSR, as well as some of their extensions such as PSROM and PSBR. The frequency of perceived contact noted by Horton & Wohl (1956) is central to this study, since it is assumed that as Covid-19 pushed individuals into isolation, their willing or unwilling exposure to media personae on a daily basis has increased, which could have imminently contributed to heightened attachment. Therefore, based on the frequency of perceived contact theory and the added contextual layer of isolation, several hypotheses (H) could be made for the findings in this study:

**H1:** During isolation individuals become more active in participating in PSIs.



**H2:** During isolation individuals find media content and media personae more relatable.

**H3:** During isolation individuals get more attached or invested in media content and/or media personae.

**H4:** During isolation individuals become more financially generous towards media personae as opposed to before or after isolation.

**H5:** Individuals who participated in PSIs during isolation report feeling less lonely than those who did not participate in PSIs.

**H6:** After the isolation period individuals exhibit PSBR behaviours.

## 5 Methodology

### 5.1 Purpose and aims

The purpose of this thesis is to contribute to previously existing research in PSRs and the effects of social isolation on individuals by intertwining the two phenomena. It will examine whether there was a change in the participants' attachment behaviours in times of crisis and will focus on their experience of PSIs in isolation. This study will also explore the ways in which such relationships affected the mental health of individuals during the Covid-19 isolation, with an additional focus on determining the post-pandemic relevance of PSRs. A portion of this study will also be dedicated to examining the "one-and-a-half" side of PSRs, but the focus will be shifted to the receiving end of such interactions by looking at the ways in which creators perceived their tasks and their communities in a time of global isolation and increased loneliness.

### 5.2 Data collection and preparation

The main data for this study was collected in a survey titled "Covid-19 Isolation & Habits" intended to measure the self-reported internet usage of participants during their mandatory isolation between January 2020 and January 2021 at the peak of the coronavirus pandemic. The survey was conducted in Google Forms, a free-to-use web-based questionnaire software which was open to participants without the requirement of a registered account, and allowed for the distribution of the survey with a hyperlink. Before its official launch, the survey underwent two pilot runs with willing testers whose answers were not included in the final analysis but were used to make changes and check the platform's usability in the preliminary stages of the study.

The survey data was cleaned with the use of the OpenRefine software, and the question answers were separated and categorized in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, the contents of which were subsequently visualized in Tableau.



The second portion of the main data for analysis was collected via manually recorded interviews with lived experience experts (LEEs). Two social media creators with contrasting goals and backgrounds were chosen for the purpose, and were asked to share their experiences from the receiving side of the parasocial scenario. Preliminary research was conducted in order to gather general information regarding the experts – such as their gender, age and preferred channels of communication. At the time the interviews were conducted, both experts had followings of approximately 1,000 and 8,000 users respectively (Table 1), and were in contact with many of them via different communicative channels. The eligibility of the LEEs was determined by their knowledge and experience in digital content creation and communication. The differences in their creator profiles were seen as important and valuable to this study’s versatility.

	<b>Expert 1 (EXP1)</b>	<b>Expert 2 (EXP2)</b>
<b>Gender</b>	Female	Male
<b>Age</b>	29	36
<b>Country</b>	U.K.	Bulgaria
<b>Main social channel</b>	Twitch	YouTube
<b>Followers</b>	1,000+	8,000+
<b>Active since</b>	2018	2019
<b>Language</b>	English	Bulgarian
<b>Content genre</b>	Entertainment	Educational
<b>Content sub-genre</b>	Gaming; Relax & Chat	Caring for parrots and other birds
<b>Content type</b>	Live/Spontaneous	Recorded/Edited
<b>Frequency of posting</b>	2-3 live streams a week	1-2 videos a month
<b>Other means of communication</b>	A Discord server	A Facebook group
<b>Most recent real-life interactions with fans</b>	Hosted a meet-up in Europe	Attended niche meetings for parrot owners
<b>Monetization</b>	Twitch donations	YouTube earnings from views
<b>Additional earnings</b>	None	Online store for parrot food and handmade toys
<b>Significant other</b>	Yes, known to the public	Yes, unknown to the public

*Table 1: LEEs profiles and information*

As previously mentioned, the design and format of the interviews followed suggestions made by Taherdoost (2022) and the questions were inspired by previous studies and theories on parasocial behaviour and interactions. Therefore, the LEEs were made aware of the topic beforehand and also at the beginning of their respective interviews, whilst the opening questions were purposefully designed to be shorter and introductory to their fields. The anonymity of the LEEs was respected and no confidential or personally identifying information regarding them was collected. Their names have been additionally redacted in all notes and transcripts related to this study.

### 5.2.1 Survey

A total of 114 participants from Europe and Asia took part in a survey titled “Covid-19 Isolation & Habits” which utilized questions related to their usual internet behaviour as compared to their browsing habits during isolation. In order to avoid unveiling the true purpose of the survey as specifically connected to parasocial



relationships, the headline was purposefully generalized, with “Covid-19” placed at the beginning to invoke a sense of the particular period of interest. The survey was comprised of 29 closed and two open questions, spaced out onto five different pages to allow for easier comprehension. The first parts were related to the collection of socio-demographic data, personal preferences and browsing habits and were gradually blended in with the more personal and “intimate” questions relating to parasocial behaviours. The majority of the questions aimed at measuring bias and attachment were placed towards the end of the survey, to stop participants from guessing the aim of the survey early-on and thus risk providing answers which were guided or influenced.

The only two criteria for participants in the survey were to be of legal age at the date of participation, and to have at least an intermediate knowledge of English. The survey was distributed in several waves across different social circles of familiar and unfamiliar participants. The full list of survey questions alongside their theoretical motivation is included in full and can be found in Appendix 1.

## 5.2.2 Interviews

In contrast to the survey participants who had no direct notion of the underlying topic whilst filling in their answers, the experts were informed of the causes and purposes of the thesis beforehand. They were invited to share their experiences, feelings and opinions specifically in connection to their content and communities before, during and after isolation, and received the full list of questions beforehand. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format via online meetings and in addition to the guiding questions, the LEEs were encouraged to share any other insights they deemed relevant.

Each LEE was presented with 15 questions in total – 13 of which were shared and two of which were personalized based on their specific profiles and experiences. Clarifying questions were also added during the interviews and in some of the cases the experts were asked to share examples. Since the general information regarding the LEE profiles was collected beforehand, the interviews were straightforward to the topic of the thesis and there were no questions relating to sociodemographic or otherwise identifying information.

The interviews were conducted via video meetings and took approximately 30 minutes each, with Expert 1 (EXP1) communicating entirely in English, while Expert 2 (EXP2), albeit an English speaker, preferred to hold the interview in their native language - Bulgarian. The session in English was recorded with online transcribing tool Sribbl, while the session in Bulgarian was recorded via manual note-taking, since transcribing tools were found to be unreliable when it came to this specific language. Only the most relevant parts of the interview in Bulgarian were translated for the purposes of the thesis, however the full transcript and notes for both interviews are available upon request.

The data gathered during both interviews was manually filtered and color-coded on a question-answer basis, and only the main takeaways and highlights were presented



in this work. The guiding interview questions alongside their theoretical motivation are included in full and can be found in Appendix 2.

### 5.3 Ethical considerations

All participants in the survey and the interviewees who were invited to participate in this study were informed that the answers they provide would be used for academic purposes. No personally identifying data was recorded while conducting the survey and the interviews. Contact information provided by all respondents who chose to submit such would be deleted within three months of this thesis' publishing. All participants were at or above the age of 18 during the collection of their responses and have participated voluntarily and anonymously.

### 5.4 Limitations

Due to the nature of some of the survey questions that target intimate or otherwise personal thoughts and experiences, some of the respondents might not have been entirely honest in their answer choices, consciously or unconsciously so. They might have preferred to understate a portion of their answers to appear in a certain light, or could have, perhaps, tried to appeal to the researcher conducting the survey by overstating their actual experiences. The distanced nature and the offline collection of responses in the survey approach are limitations by themselves, since they eliminate the possibility of asking additional clarifying questions on the spot. However, this particular aspect was addressed by offering some of the participants the opportunity to write down their contact information if they are open to further communication. The survey approach for data collecting might also be seen as limiting in the sense that, as compared to an open interview, it only allows for certain answers to choose from. However, including an open option and inviting participants to add choices of their own offered a possibility to partially eliminate this issue.

Another limitation worth noting is the nature of the time period itself and, by extension, its connection to Covid-19 which could be perceived as a sensitive or even a controversial topic. The timeline was chosen specifically because it was associated with a unique shared experience of isolation, therefore connecting it to the topic of this work, but its underlying relation to negative experiences such as health concerns and trauma coping could not have been avoided. There was, however, no other recent global event that pushed people into required isolation that could have been used as a common shared criterion, much less one connected to positive experiences. The study was conducted in 2023, some two years after the peak isolation period, meaning that some people might have forgotten the details of their experiences. It is also worth noting that albeit the country breakdown of the survey respondents is quite varied, some of the countries were represented by a sole participant, thus making it difficult to expand the analysis into a more general direction. In fact, the majority of the participants in the survey were based in Bulgaria, hence why this thesis could be seen more as a reflection on the collective experience particular to this country, rather than an attempt to generalize and unify PSI in isolation on a global scale.



## 6 Presentation of results

### 6.1 Survey

#### 6.1.1 Sociodemographic characteristics

A total of 114 participants took part in the survey, with the majority of them being between the ages of 25 and 34, while the second largest category was comprised of respondents between 35 and 55 years of age (Figure 1). The youngest category of participants between 18 and 24 years of age was represented by 11 respondents, while the category of 55+ had only one individual.

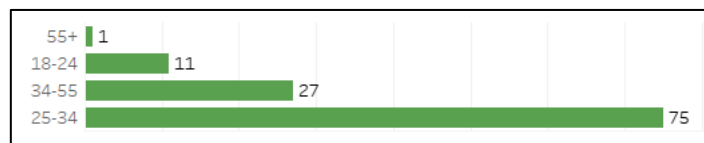


Figure 1: Current age of the participants

Respondents who identified as female comprised approximately 68% by of the total participatory ratio, with males standing at 29.8%, while the category of other saw only 1.8% of the whole, or the equivalent of two people.

The majority of the participants at 65.8% had full-time employments during the one-year period between January 2020 and January 2021, and 18.4% were students (Figure 2). People who were either self-employed or on a part-time contract comprised a combined 7.9% of the total respondent pool, with the category of the unemployed marking 7%. And while there was at least one participant who was retired, no housemakers were have participated in this survey.

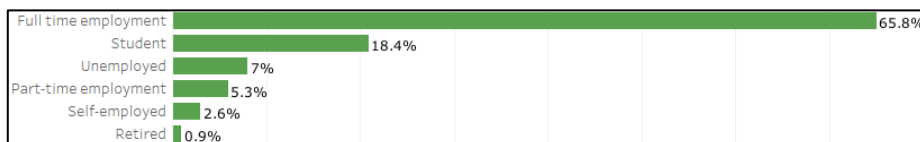


Figure 2: Employment distribution

Perhaps the most compelling portion of the sociodemographic section is the country breakdown (Figure 3) which saw a diversified answer pool despite the 74.6% predominance of participants from Bulgaria, or the equivalent of 85 respondents. A total of 13 countries were listed in this section, with presence in Europe and Asia. Representation from the United Kingdom came in second with 9 respondents, with Serbia taking third place with 4 individuals. The northern European countries of Norway and Sweden had a combined participation of 6 people, while central-based Germany and The Netherlands had three people in total. The southern countries of Italy, Spain and Greece also had at least one respondent each. People based in Asia during their time in isolation, more specifically in Vietnam, South Korea or Japan marked a combined percentage of 3.6% of the total number of participants, or the equivalent of 4 people.



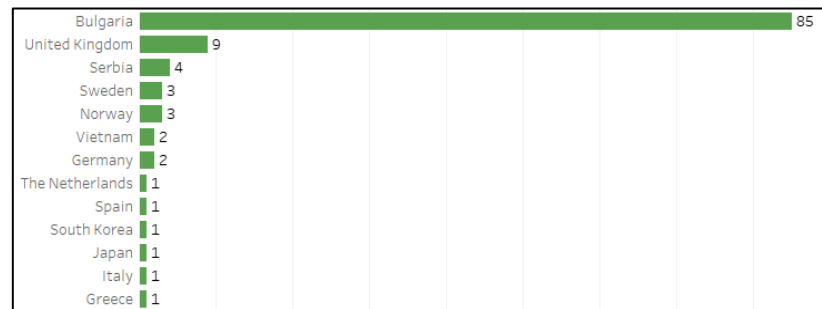


Figure 3: "In what country were you based at during the majority of your overall Covid-19 isolation?"

In addition to their country of isolation, the respondents in the survey were asked to specify whether they spent their time in a more loosely or a more densely populated area. The results showed that 70.2% of the participants were isolated in a major city, while 29.8% were based in a smaller town or in the countryside during the pandemic.

### 6.1.2 Media activity

The respondents were asked to specify how much time they spent online during their isolation as compared to before that and the majority of them at 68.4% or the equivalent of 78 people shared that their time online increased during the pandemic (Figure 4). People who spent the same amount of time online as they did in the pre-Covid era were 34 in total, while only two people or the equivalent of 1.8% of the complete answer pool spent less time browsing during isolation than before that.

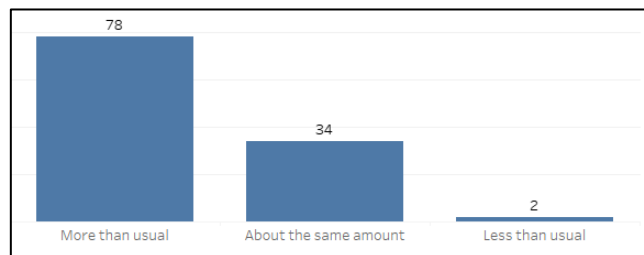


Figure 4: "How much time did you spend online during your isolation, in comparison to the time before that?"

To understand the internet browsing habits of the respondents during the Covid-19 period, the survey introduced questions related to their preferred social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, Reddit, YouTube, Twitch, Discord and VLive), inquiring about the amount of time respondents spent in them. The most popular platform was YouTube, which marked the highest scores in the hourly and daily categories, with Instagram and Facebook following through. The least popular social media channel was VLive, which was introduced to the respondents in combination with Amino and Weverse. However, it should be noted that all three of these platforms are specialized to niche content connected to South Korean popular culture, and it seems that not many people within this particular list of respondents were interested in the suggested niche. These social platforms were



only included as options due to the high propensity of PSRs formation in South Korean popular culture, as suggested by Souders (2022).

Respondents were also asked to specify the top three types of accounts they browsed on a daily basis during isolation (Figure 5), where the category of “Friends and Family Accounts” ranked first with 55.3%, followed by “Funny/Lighthearted accounts” at 50%, while “Content Creators and Influencers” scored third place, marking 46.5%. The majority of the respondents disregarded the note to only choose their preferred top three categories, and instead selected everything which rang true to them regardless of ranking. This will not be marked as a negative for the analysis portion of the report, as it still provided valuable usage data.

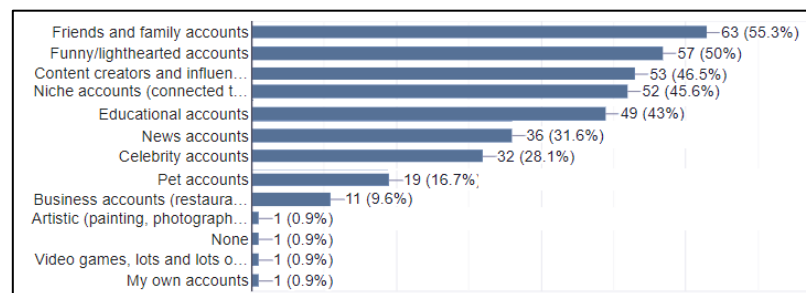


Figure 5: “What types of accounts did you browse on a daily basis during your isolation?”

The frequency of social media activity exhibited by the participants during their time in isolation was also measured by asking them to identify how often they engaged in interactions with social media creators and online content by liking, commenting or sharing. The available options were “less than before”, “the same as before” and “more than before”, as well as an “I did not engage” category for those who preferred viewing rather than interacting with media content. The majority of the participants, or approximately 70 for each of the three activities indicated that their interaction habits were the same as before the pandemic, and another big group stated that they did not engage in any of the suggested ways at all. However, there were approximately 20 individuals who engaged with media content more than before the pandemic by predominantly liking and sharing, with commenting coming in third on the list. Those who interacted with media content less than before the pandemic were the smallest group, spanning between 2 to 6 people out of 114 participants in total.

### 6.1.3 Loneliness, mental health and isolation

Data regarding the degree of perceived loneliness experienced by participants on a self-reported basis was collected by asking direct and indirect questions on the topic. At the beginning of the survey, the respondents had to indicate the number of people in their household at the time of isolation and 41 participants answered that they lived with 2-3 other people during the global Covid-19 crisis. At second place with 39 responses were those who shared a household with one other person, while 19 participants lived with 4 or more people beside them. Only 15 respondents reported that they were alone during isolation.



When asked to indicate the degree of perceived loneliness they felt during isolation on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being “not very lonely” and 7 being “very lonely”, the majority of the participants were inclined towards the lower end of the scale (Figure 6). The most popular answer was 1 or “not very lonely”, which was chosen by 28 respondents, closely followed by the second step in the scale, as chosen by 23 people. The extreme ends of 6 and 7 on the perceived scale of loneliness during isolation were chosen by 15 and 12 people, respectively, while the least number of participants opted for the middle of the scale at 4, albeit the differences between 3 and 7 consisted of one participant only, hence the results were, in actuality, very close.

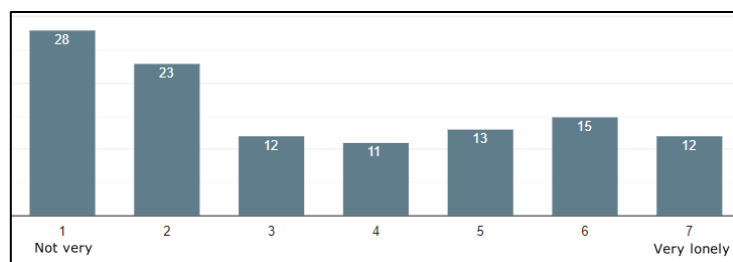


Figure 6: “How lonely did you feel during your time in isolation?”

Another question targeting the degree of perceived loneliness asked participants to determine to what extent did their exposure to online media help them in feeling less lonely during their pandemic isolation (Figure 7). On a scale from 1 being “not much” to 7 being “a lot”, the highest result was shared between the numbers 4 and 5 on the scale, as indicated by 22 participants each. The rest of the categories scored very similarly to each other, with the lowest one being number 6 on the scale, and the second highest one at number 2 on the scale being chosen by 17 people in total. Overall, the combined answers from the lower part of the scale (1-3) totalled to 45 in total, while the higher part of the scale (5-7) was preferred by 47 participants.

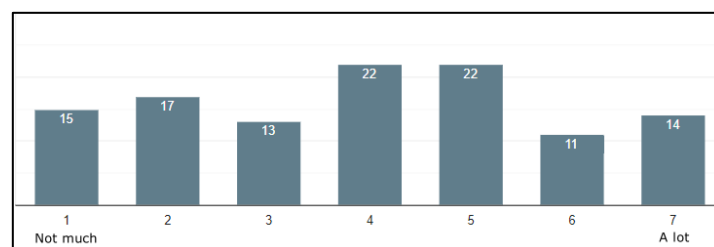


Figure 7: “How much did being online help you in feeling less lonely during quarantine?”

The third question of this kind was also presented in the form of a scale from 1 to 7, but this time individuals had to indicate the stability of their mental health during the pandemic, based on their own perception of it, with 1 being “not very” and 7 being “very stable”. The most popular evaluation amongst the survey participants was at number 6, as chosen by 28 people, while numbers 2 and 5 on the scale received an equal score of 17 votes each. It is interesting to note that the 3 and 4 marks also had equal scores of 15 answers each. The lower extreme of the scale at 1



was chosen by 9 participants, while 13 participants evaluated their mental health during the pandemic as “very stable” by choosing 7 on the scale.

Another pair of questions aimed at understanding the degree of perceived isolation and loneliness the respondents experienced asked them to state whether they have wished or imagined meeting some of the people they have seen or interacted with online. The majority of the respondents at 71% or the equivalent of 81 people answered negatively, while the remaining 33 participants, equal to 29% of the total answer pool admitted to having had such experiences. Those who answered positively received an additional question, prompting them to share the context and motivation of their imagined meetings with people from the online sphere. The question was open and optional, and 21 out of the 33 participants who answered positively chose to provide a response.

The results could be separated roughly into four categories based on the type of context they provided. As seen below in Table 2, Category 1 was comprised of individuals who created imaginary scenarios based on their formation of parasocial attachment to media figures. Category 2 had people who were engaging in digital communication with family, friends or strangers, and wanted to see them in real life. Category 3 was reserved for those who had found new online connections during the pandemic and wanted to meet these individuals in real life, while Category 4 was comprised of respondents who simply craved human contact of any kind. Only three examples for each category were highlighted in the table below; however, the full list of responses is available upon request:

<b>Category 1: Parasocial connections</b>	<b>Category 2: Real-life connections</b>	<b>Category 3: Digitally-formed connections</b>	<b>Category 3: Any connection</b>
A YouTuber who creates content about literature. I wished I could have a friend who shared my interests and liked to talk about them as much as it seems she does.	Before the isolation, my friends and I used to go to social events such as exhibitions, karaoke nights and local concerts or to have board game nights and we tried to recreate some of these events online. However, playing online games together did work very well for us, so I wished we could hang out in person at our favourite spots.	I met new people online and we became close friends who communicated daily and we talked about wanting to meet up in real life someday (and we did later on!) I guess we wanted to meet up because we were friends who wanted to spend time together in person.	Just a normal human face to face conversation at this point, because that was what I missed the most.
I imagined we could go get dinner outside and talk about pop culture together.	I was in a different country than my home one and I wished to travel and see them sooner than possible.	We were in the "before confession" stage, where you question if the person on the other side also likes you and, in the beginning of 2021, we started dating.	Mostly wanted to hug them, and trust me I don't do that.
They look like cool people to befriend.	Well, I really missed some of my colleagues from work. It was fun talking (...) at the office during shift.	I wanted to see if they are the same IRL.	I wanted to see people. Interaction in person is irreplaceable for me.

Table 2: “Would you like to share what was the context? What did you imagine? Why did you wish to meet them?”



### 6.1.4 Attachment, investment and PSR

The formation of attachments to media personae during isolation was measured by asking participants to answer a few direct questions on a self-evaluation basis and determine their perceived degrees of attachment. For one of the questions participants had to indicate the degree of their attachment to stories or people seen online on a 1 to 7 scale, with 1 being “not very” and 7 standing for “very attached” (Figure 8). The highest scoring numbers were 4 and 5, with 27 and 28 votes respectively, while numbers 2 and 3 on the scale were chosen by 18 people each. A total of 13 participants leaned towards the low extreme and chose 1 for their attachment during isolation, while 6 of the respondents felt “very attached” and chose 7 or the high extreme on the scale. The lowest number of votes on self-evaluated attachment was recorded for 6 on the scale.

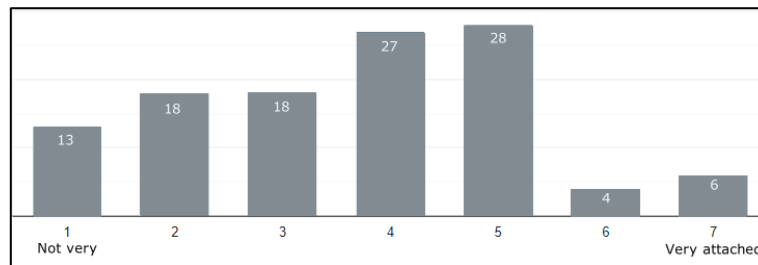


Figure 8: “How attached or involved did you feel with the stories and people you have seen online during your isolation?”

Linguistic identifiers were used as a measure instead of numbers for the second question related to attachments, and participants could choose between feeling or not feeling stronger attachment towards media personae during isolation. The majority of the respondents or 85 in total indicated that they did not feel more attached during isolation, while the remaining 29 answered that they did feel a stronger attachment towards media figures. To understand the reasoning behind the formation of those attachments during isolation, the respondents were consequently asked to indicate why they were drawn to certain media during isolation in the first place, and 76 people chose the content itself as the reason, while only 6 people felt attachment because of the persona related to said content. The remaining 33 participants reportedly expressed interest both in the content and the persona.

In a cross-examination of the two questions (Figure 9), it can be observed that the majority of the participants who were interested in the content only did not exhibit any self-reported attachment towards the personae in extension of it, but even amongst those respondents who have experienced feelings of attachment – content as a reason was still marked as the highest-scoring choice.

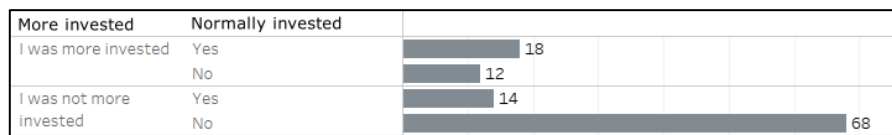
More attached	Reason for being drawn to certain media		
	More because of the content	More because of the person	Both
I felt more attached	15	4	10
I did not feel more attached	61	2	22

Figure 9: “During your isolation did you feel more personally attached to experiences related to or shared by celebrities, influencers or fictional characters than before isolation?” / “During isolation did you predominantly tend to get drawn to a certain media (books, films, music, art,



*sports etc.) because of the content itself, or because of the person or people showcasing it or associated with it?"*

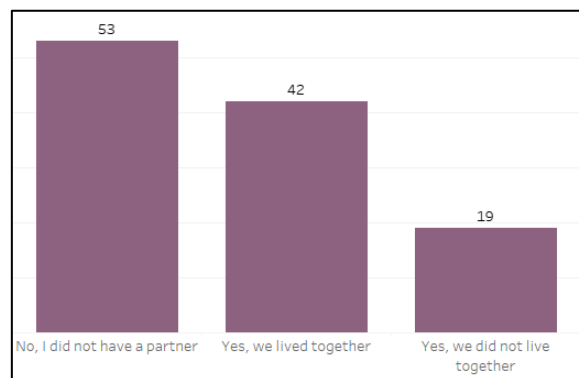
In two separate questions the respondents were asked whether they felt stronger investment towards certain media figures during isolation and whether they were prone to exhibiting the same degree of investment outside of isolation. The answers to these questions were combined to save space (Figure 10), and results demonstrated that people who were not prone to showing interest in media content in general were predominantly not more invested in it during their time in isolation. Those on the opposite spectrum, namely participants who were more invested in content seen on social media were predominantly the same ones who would usually express interest in it, with or without the factor of self-isolation. However, out of the two groups in the in-between sections, some of the individuals who were not more invested in social media content were reportedly prone to showing interest in it in general, while some of those who were invested during isolation were self-reportedly not prone to exhibiting such dedication. It should also be noted that the two in-between sections scored very closely to each other, with a difference of two people only.



*Figure 10: "During your isolation did you find yourself more invested in news about celebrities, influencers or fictional characters as compared to your time before isolation?"/ "During your isolation did you feel more personally attached to experiences related to or shared by celebrities, influencers or fictional characters than before isolation?"*

### 6.1.5 PSROM and PSBR

In addition to sharing information about the number of other people in the household, the respondents were asked to indicate whether they had a significant other during isolation (Figure 11). Approximately 46.5% of the participants, or 53 in total shared that they were single at the time of isolation, while 36.8% or the equivalent of 42 people had a partner with whom they were living during the pandemic. A total of 19 people standing at 16.7% of the total participants had partners but did not live with them during isolation.



*Figure 11: "Did you have a significant other during your time in isolation and did you live together?"*



It is interesting to note that when crossing the data to explore the presence or the lack of a spouse with the amount of time participants spent online (Figure 12), it could be seen that 36 participants or the majority of the people who have spent more time online in isolation were those who did not have a partner at the time. In comparison, those who were in relationships and were living with their partners amounted to 26 people, or 10 people less than the previous category, while those who had partners but were not living with them at the time amounted to 16 people in total, marking another difference of 10 participants within the “more than usual” category only. Additionally, for those who spent about the same amount of time online 15 participants either had a spouse with whom they were living at the time, while 16 others or did not have a partner at all, thus marking very close results for this category.

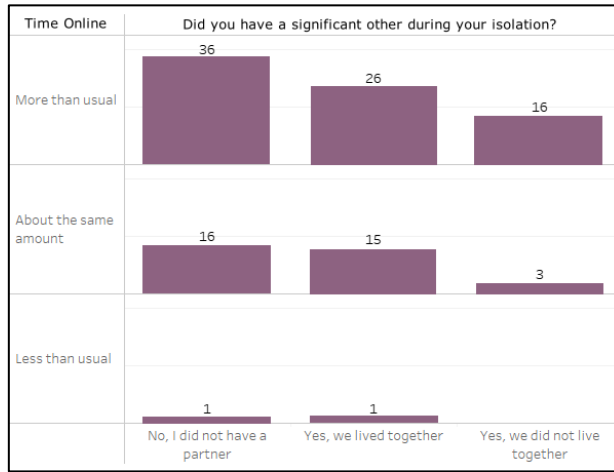


Figure 12: “How much time did you spend online during your isolation, in comparison to the time before that?” / “Did you have a significant other during your time in isolation and did you live together?”

A key question for the identification of PSROM was related to the concept of a “comfort person” defined as someone who felt like a safe and positive presence to the participants, with a clarification that there could be multiple co-occurring “comfort persons”. When asked to identify whether they had such a figure and what type of a relationship they had with it, 79 of the participants or the majority stated that their comfort person was someone whom they knew in real life (Figure 13). The second largest category was comprised of 28 respondents who denied having such a person, while the answers truly connected to PSR gathered small interest. Fictional characters were chosen as comfort persons by 9 participants, while 8 people found certain celebrities/influencers as a safe space. In addition to that, 4 participants chose the category of “other”.

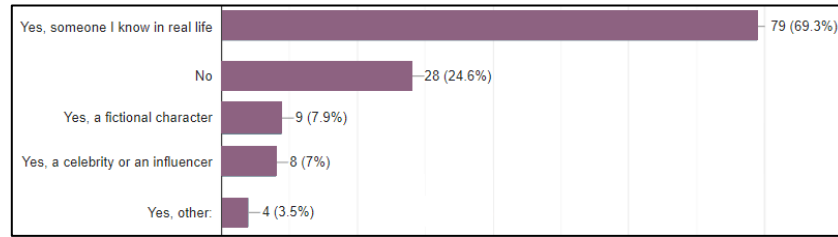


Figure 13: “Did you have a “comfort person” during your time in isolation? Someone who made you feel safe, happy and was a positive presence to you. It could be more than one person.”

To observe PSBR a follow-up question to the previous one asked the participants whether they still followed or kept in contact with their comfort persons and 75 respondents or the majority of them answered positively, while 7 people said that they kept in contact on an occasional basis. Only 5 people out of 114 participants answered negatively, and to 27 of the respondents the question was redundant as they did not have a comfort person to begin with.

Another more straightforward question asked participants to share whether they found a “celebrity crush” or someone they admired during their time in isolation, and whether they followed this persona on social media. The majority of the participants at 78 in total answered that they did not have such a figure, and other 21 people admitted that they were already following their celebrity crush during the period of isolation. Out of 114 participants only 10 people found a new celebrity crush and followed them on social media, while 5 respondents found one but decided against clicking the “follow” button.

Earlier in the survey the respondents had to answer a question relating to whether they have found any new social media accounts to follow during their time in isolation, and whether they still followed them (Figure 14). This is another question that related directly to PSBR and 47 of the participants answered positively to both statements, while 25 said that they did find new accounts of interest, but were currently following only some of them. Only 7 people admitted to not following accounts found whilst in isolation anymore, and the remaining 35 individuals have reportedly not found any new accounts to follow at all.

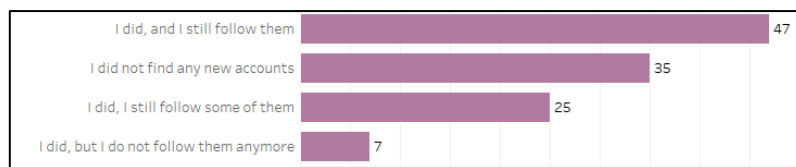


Figure 14: “Did you find any new social media accounts to follow during your time in isolation? Do you still follow them?”

### 6.1.6 Monetization

Two of the questions in the survey were related to financial contributions made to media personae during isolation. In the first question respondents were asked to share whether they have made any such contributions alongside the reason for them. Out of 114 participants, 82 reportedly did not make any monetary donations to





online creators, thus marking an overwhelming majority. Those who have contributed however comprised of 14 people who had reportedly bought merchandise, 11 who had donated to a campaign related to them and 8 respondents who had decided to help specifically for reasons connected to Covid-19. Only 5 people had reportedly donated to content creators through third-party platforms such as Twitch, Patreon, Ko-fi or YouTube.

The second question asked participants to make a distinction between their financial contributions before and during isolation (Figure 15), and the majority of them at 62.3% or the equivalent of 71 people answered that they did not contribute to online figures in general. Another 27 respondents said that their contributions were about the same as before, and 11 participants in the survey reportedly contributed more than usual. The remaining 5 people admitted to making less frequent monetary contributions to online figures during the pandemic, as compared to before that.

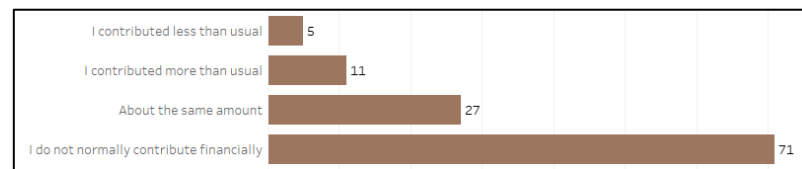


Figure 15: “Did you find yourself making more financial contributions to creators during isolation in comparison to before January 2020?”

## 6.2 Expert interviews

Both experts shared that although their separate media activities prior to the pandemic were fairly new, started at around 2018, they noticed a boost in the social engagement and interest displayed towards their channels during the pandemic. EXP1 mentioned a surge in the number of viewers who tuned in to her live streams, and in extension to that – the activity of the users also heightened with more people writing comments and using other functions of the Twitch platform, instead of remaining as passive observers. EXP2 shared a similar experience, noting that as the pandemic pushed more and more people into isolation the content his channel provided started gaining more interest, to the point where the subscriber count grew from 200 to 2,000 in just a couple of weeks during the first big wave of government-imposed restrictions in Bulgaria specifically.

The relationships that the LEEs have formed with their communities during isolation turned out to be drastically different, with live streamer EXP1 reportedly gathering a community of like-minded individuals (COM1) who supported each other through a period of crisis, while YouTube content creator EXP2 shared that the relationship with his community (COM2) was strictly a business matter, reliant upon a shared interest. When asked to elaborate on this, EXP2 said that since the nature of his channel was primarily educational, viewers were more interested in learning something rather than socializing, and would help each other in the comment section by answering questions related to parrot healthcare, but would not go out of their ways to engage with him outside of the topic. By contrast, the community formed by EXP1 was active in Discord on a daily basis, and



communicated on a variety of topics. The deeper relationship that was formed in COM1 resulted in individuals continuing communication even after the pandemic, and even organizing a meet-up in Europe, joined by fans of EXP1 whose attachment has grown both internally between themselves and externally to the creator in question. However, despite the closeness exhibited in COM1, user activity both in and outside of the live streams saw a drop after the period of isolation. To quote EXP1 directly:

When (...) measures got a little bit more reduced we'd still communicate pretty much on a daily basis. That sort of friendship-community that was formed did remain the same, but activity was definitely reduced and I think people were just excited to go and see some other faces again. (...) Right now, it's gone back to being a little bit more active than it was, maybe after the excitement of being able to go outside and communicate calmed down a little bit. [Now] it is the same as [it was] pre-Covid. It is a nice balance between people feeling comfortable enough to just relax and not feeling like this stream or chat is their sole point of contact.

EXP2 observed the same pattern for his content, with people engaging more during the pandemic as opposed to after it. He also reported that in the past three months viewers have started commenting and subscribing to his YouTube channel more as compared to the period directly after the pandemic.

Both experts shared that during the pandemic viewers in COM1 and COM2 were more actively reaching out for advice or felt inclined to share their experiences, but there was nothing too alarming or personal to note. Some of the viewers would message EXP2 privately to send photos of their parrots and showcase their growth and well-being, or would reach out to seek advice on how to care for their pets. In EXP1's case viewers would seek reassurance or advice, but this has been a common occurrence before, during and after the pandemic.

In regards to PSI in general, EXP1 expressed that she was happy to communicate with her viewers and "everyone was more than free to reach out" to her. On occasion, some viewers would overstep her boundaries by asking personal questions or assuming she would enjoy a specific game or a topic, but there was no spike in such instances during the pandemic. In the case of EXP2, subscribers to his YouTube channel did not seem particularly interested in him or his personal life, and focused on the parrots featured on the channel, as if forming attachments to them instead. To quote EXP2:

If I uploaded a photo of myself, I would get very few reacts. (...) But a photo of any of the birds would receive a plethora of likes and comments praising how beautiful the bird was or how well-behaved. The parrots were the stars of the channel and it was understandable, (...) but it was almost as if the viewers perceived the birds as the owners of the channel instead of me.

However, EXP2 added that despite the abundance of exotic birds featured on the channel, viewers did not seem to have a favorite or prefer one bird over another –



they were simply happy to see them. This behavior was more frequent during the pandemic, with viewers sometimes demanding to see photos of certain birds or asking about how they were doing specifically. Some of the comments relating to the birds referred to them as one would do to people or friends, and used second person pronouns (you, your, yours).

The aspect of PSROM was also discussed during the interviews, and EXP1 shared that her relationship was communicated openly and COM1 usually expressed happiness about it, including during the pandemic. Even when a viewer tried to overstep, they did so with no visible romantic intention in mind. EXP2 also reported that there were no specific romantic gestures made towards him. At the time of the pandemic his YouTube channel was maintained by him and his significant other, but the nature of their relationship was never communicated to the public and only a select few people knew about it. However, viewers did not seem interested in asking about it either, and were mostly focusing on the content or the birds showcased in the videos.

On the matter of PSRs during isolation and the effect on creators, the LEEs had differing opinions. In the case of EXP1, communicating online and forming friendships was a desired effect and it felt natural. EXP1 explained that at the time she had just moved to a foreign country and all of her real-life friendships had shifted to the online realm, hence forming connections to new people via live streaming did not feel too different. EXP2 on the other hand expressed that he was not entirely comfortable with the relationships which viewers were forming with him and his birds during isolation. The initial idea of EXP2's channel was to provide purely educational content in a field previously seen as a small niche, but the pandemic brought about an overwhelming amount of interest into the topic, and with this – too many people with ideas and demands:

Before Covid I wanted to make content for content's sake and educate people about exotic birds. But [once the interest peaked during isolation] I felt pressured to deliver content faster and appeal to an audience. My videos take a lot of research, sometimes up to 15 days, and I had to produce them quicker to satisfy the demands of complete strangers (...) which stressed me out. (...) I slept less, lost track of time and got angry when a certain video was not as well received as I expected [it to be].

As isolation restrictions fell, EXP2 gradually reduced the frequency of the content uploaded on his YouTube channel and took a break from social media, ceasing almost all points of contact to him as a person, although subscribers were still writing to the channel and in the private Facebook group of COM2 to share their experiences. In contrast, as previously mentioned, EXP1 was eager to meet her fanbase in real-life and hosted a group meeting, with COM1 remaining a steady source of two-way support.

When asked about the monetary aspect of content creation in isolation, both LEEs reported that individuals were more generous during the pandemic than before or after it. EXP1 said that stream viewers donated more often, while EXP2's online



store associated with his YouTube channel marked better earnings, as viewers felt more inclined to purchase the products promoted there and seen on videos. EXP2 specifically mentioned that viewers would make direct inquiries about those items, expressing a desire to own them. According to EXP2, during the pandemic there was a general surge in the adopting and purchasing of pets, and parrots were a particularly popular at-home companion, which explained why viewers visited EXP2's online store more often and why the interest in his videos grew all of a sudden. In the case of EXP1, she was left with the impression that viewers were donating with no specific reason in mind, as neither the content nor the frequency of the streams was any different than before.

## 7 Analysis

During isolation individuals spent more time online than usual which led to them communicating online on a daily basis for a variety of reasons spanning from work, entertainment or a need for socialization. This was previously indicated by Jarzyna (2021) in a study conducted at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and it was confirmed to be the case for the participants of this study as well. As one of the sole means of contact, online communication peaked, but this did not necessarily lead to people engaging with media content in a predominantly active, rather than a passive way. In terms of the B(ehavior) dimension of PSRs (Garcia, Björk and Kazemitabar, 2022), the majority of the survey respondents reported that during the pandemic they were liking, commenting and sharing with the same frequency as prior to it, as exemplified in Figure 5. However, the information shared by EXP1 and EXP2 provides a contrasting viewpoint, as both LEEs indicated a peak in the engagement seen across their different platforms specifically during the pandemic, noting that their personal fanbases have become more active. This could potentially mean that people might not have been aware that the amount of active engagement they were participating in was more than what they had previously perceived as the subjective norm.

This presumption can be further extended to the formation of digital attachment during a time of isolation, with individuals not necessarily feeling as if they have consciously joined a following or a community. Cohen & Martin (2023) discussed that especially for live streams it was possible to form second-hand PSR with a persona or a community, and EXP1 confirmed that the number of visitors to her streams during the pandemic has grown, with more people becoming active, albeit not all of them. In addition to that, the layer of reciprocity which live streams offered made COM1 experience the interactions with the persona on a more intimate level, mimicking the genuineness of a personal physical relationship, and even forming friendships with EXP1. Therefore, the initial statement proposed by Horton & Wohl (1956) which argued that reciprocity could break the pattern of a PSR is partially true for the case of EXP1 who managed to form friendships with some of the members of COM1. The case of EXP2 also partially contradicts this theory, since the audience of his YouTube channel perceived his reciprocity as an educationally enriching opportunity rather than a personally highlighting occurrence. The reciprocity which COM2 experienced was only meaningful to them



because it provided information, and EXP2 even mentioned that viewers of his channel did not particularly mind who the person delivering the information would be, so long as it was available. Therefore, it could be argued that while Horton & Wohl (1956) were correct in determining that reciprocity in PSIs could break the para-aspect of them, the depth and context of such reciprocity plays a vital role in its stability and meaningfulness.

Delving deeper into the topic of personally meaningful connections formed online and observing their Affective dimension (Garcia, Björk and Kazemitabar, 2022) it seems that the parasocial aspect received a surprisingly low representation in the participants of this study based on the collective data. The majority of them were neither more invested nor more attached to celebrities, influencers or fictional characters seen online during isolation, as opposed to before that. Even those who have reported stronger attachment pointed to the content as the underlying reason for it, rather than the persona connected to it, as visualized in Figure 9. This goes against the rules of attachment theory presented by Ainsworth (1978), but is accurate to what Stever (2013) described as a *possibility* to form PSA to frequently observed media figures, rather than a *certainty*. Additionally, based on the insights shared by the LEEs, it seems that the exposure to the persona and the content more prominently led to the formation of an interactive community and not a simple one-sided relationship specifically to the persona. In the case of EXP1 the fanbase revolved around her as a central bridging figure, but members of COM1 were as frequently in contact with her as they were with each other, thus confirming the observations made by Kowert & Emory (2021) about the importance of fanbase dedication. The same phenomenon, albeit on a lower scale was observed in COM2 where people interacted with each other to offer educational information or advice, united by a topic but still not necessarily extending to the persona.

The D(ecisive) dimension or PSRs, as suggested by Garcia, Björk and Kazemitabar (2022) was showcased in this study predominantly in the role assumed by EXP2 as an authoritative figure of knowledge to his viewers. Individuals in COM2 exhibited trust in the information provided by him and relied on his expertise within a niche market. As an extension to that, they were more active in purchasing specialized merchandise from his online shop, and the heightened interest in the topic during the pandemic led to larger marketability. A similar pattern was observed with EXP1 where isolation brought about more viewers, and with this – more donations during live streams. However, both experts denied feeling any correlation between the peak in monetization and a supposed deepening of PSRs, with EXP2 explaining that it was a result of the expansion of a niche market, while EXP1 said that there did not seem to be a particular reason behind the payments. This was confirmed to an extent by the survey data of this study highlighted in Figure 15, with the majority of the participants saying that they did contribute financially during the pandemic either about the same amount as before that or even more so. However, the major motivator for such contributions seemed to be the acquiring of merchandise connected to the creators rather than a desire to support them in a more open way such as making donations via third-party platforms. The ownership of creator-connected merchandise also ties in with the concept of wishful identification (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005), and EXP2 confirmed that viewers would reach out to



him more during the pandemic, wanting to purchase and own the same merchandise which was featured in his content.

In their open answers regarding the imagining of interactions with online personae, one of the respondents specifically indicated that they wanted to meet them to see whether they were the same “in real life”, while another one shared that the persona they followed seemed like “a cool” person to “befriend”. This dimension of PSRs as suggested by Garcia, Björk and Kazemitabar (2022) is known as the C(ognitive) one and relates to the way viewers perceive a persona. As previously discussed, especially during isolation online communication and media were used as tools to find comfort in a time of crisis, and this dynamic was explored by asking survey respondents about their relations to a so-called “comfort person”. While the majority of the participants relied on real-life connections and others denied having such a person, those who did find comfort in an online presence turned to fictional characters as sources of comfort. Rain & Mar (2021) and Stever (2013) noted that such connections were perceived as real and were impactful to alleviating the feeling of loneliness experienced during the pandemic, since those respondents who had comfort persons marked lower scores on the self-evaluation scale of loneliness.

As for PSBR, as Barbara & Dion (2000) previously indicated – popular media is transitive in nature and audiences are accustomed to moving on from it. Both LEEs have noted that there was a drop in the engagement exhibited by their audiences directly after the dissipation of quarantine restrictions, with EXP1 explaining the phenomenon as viewers being excited to socialize in person again. In addition to that, survey participants as seen in Figure 14 noted that they were still following their comfort persons even after isolation, thus leading to a notion that the lack of active engagement does not necessarily have to correspond to exhibiting PSBR, and it might be contributed to a need for a momentary break instead. The LEEs additionally confirmed that sometime after the post-pandemic calm many of their viewers came back to engaging in interactions with as similar of a frequency as before.

Finally, in regards to PSROM in isolation, none of the experts has noticed any difference in the way they were perceived by their audiences during the pandemic. As for the survey participants – the majority of them did not report finding any individuals they would define as a “celebrity crush”, and those who did form such attachments were a very small percentage, thus leading to a conclusion that being in a state of isolation might not necessarily correspond to developing a higher propensity for the formation of PSROM.

## 8 Key findings

The purpose of this thesis was to bridge the phenomena of PSI with the concept of isolation to see whether it had any effects on the depth or formation of PSRs. Based on separate literature on the two notions six hypotheses were formed.



H1 presumed that “during isolation individuals become more active in participating in PSIs” and this has indeed been observed particularly in Figure 5 as relating to survey question Q14 which asked audiences about their activity during isolation as opposed to before that. The respondents confirmed that they were engaging more actively with media personae by liking, commenting, sharing and donating rather than simply observing them passively. However, the increased frequency of exposure to media figures did not coincide with a spike in the formation of PSRs and simply contributed to a heightened social media engagement.

H2 stated that “during isolation individuals find media content and media personae more relatable”, and as reported by the LEEs, individuals have indeed shown higher interest in the content shared by them as creators. In the case of EXP1, the relatability extended to other members in the community and individuals even formed bonds with each other, although this could not be entirely contributed to the influence of the pandemic. However, it could be said that as isolation pushed more people to seek connections online, it was easier to find like-minded individuals in an environment of shared interests where relatability was higher. EXP2 also reported marking higher relatability on a topical level, as during isolation his creative niche attracted more people interested in purchasing companion birds, and caring for them was a natural extension to the need, thus making his content more relatable.

According to H3: “during isolation individuals get more attached or invested in media content and/or media personae”, however, the data collected in the survey particularly showcased in Figure 8 as relating to Q16 which asked individuals to determine their degree of attachment during isolation on a scale from 1 to 7, revealed that the degree of attachment was moderate, with a total of 55 people choosing either 4 or 5 on the scale. Additionally, in Q19 which asked participants whether they felt stronger attachment to media figures in isolation, 61 out of 114 respondents answered negatively. Even the ones who answered positively, as observed in Figure 9, seemed to be more interested in the content rather than the person, which coincides with the observations of EXP2 who mentioned that it was the content that his audience was interested in, rather than him as a person. In terms of investment, Figure 10 relating to Q18 and Q20 highlighted that the factor of isolation did not contribute to a higher degree of investment into media personae or media content, since the majority of the participants exhibited the same degree of interest during the pandemic as before that. Additionally, those participants who felt more invested in the personae or content marked the lowest group in the answer pool.

Per H4, “during isolation individuals become more financially generous towards media personae as opposed to before or after isolation”, and survey data relating to Q26 and visualized in Figure 15 revealed that individuals were indeed either contributing the same amount or more. This excludes the largest group of respondents who answered that they usually do not make monetary contributions at all. The LEE testimonials also noted a heightened financial generosity exhibited by their audiences during the pandemic, with both EXP1 and EXP2 describing an increase in monetary gain either through direct donations or as revenue in an online store.



H5 stated that “individuals who participated in PSIs during isolation report feeling less lonely than those who did not participate in PSIs”. According to the data observed in Figure 6 as related to Q15, when asked to determine their perceived degree of loneliness during the pandemic on a scale from 1 to 7, a total of 51 survey respondents chose either 1 or 2, stating that they did not feel very lonely during isolation. Despite this, Figure 7 relating to Q16 showcases that when asked whether being online helped with alleviating their loneliness during isolation, a total of 47 respondents chose positive degrees between 5 and 7 on the scale, while 45 respondents chose negative degrees between 1 and 3, saying that being online did not help them feel less lonely. It should be noted, however, that “being online” here does not guarantee the formation of a PSI. In their interviews the LEEs reported that as people engaged with them more during the pandemic and confided in them on occasion, the communities which were formed provided a certain sense of support and even escapism. Therefore, although it could be said that being online was helpful to some people, many of the survey participants did not reportedly exhibit heightened degrees of loneliness in the first place, hence why the data supporting the benefits of PSIs to alleviating loneliness is not very abundant and this hypothesis might benefit from additional examination and further research.

Finally, in H6 it was suggested that “after the isolation period individuals exhibit PSBR behaviours”. In H1 it was already discussed that individuals spent more time online in isolation and therefore more time engaging in PSIs. EXP1 and EXP2 reported that shortly after the fall of the Covid-19 isolation restrictions, the engagement of their respective audiences was reduced, but the majority of the followers returned back to their regular communication patterns after a while. In Q12 as visualized in Figure 14 the majority of the survey respondents also expressed that they were still following all or at least some of the creators they found during isolation. Therefore, it can be said that albeit there were individuals who exhibited PSBR behaviours after isolation, people more commonly still chose to follow the creators or content they found during the quarantine period. According to the LEEs in particular, they observed a pattern of a parasocial break, rather than a parasocial breakup.

## 9 Conclusion

### 9.1 Contribution

This study aimed at contributing to previously existing research by intertwining the phenomenon of PSRs and the effects of social isolation on individuals. It managed to confirm four out of six hypotheses in connection to this combined theory, additionally disproving one and confirming another in part.

It also managed to showcase the roles of both creators and audiences in a parasocial scenario and used isolation as a global phenomenon to motivate some of the findings relating to the formation of attachments and relationships.





## 9.2 Future research

Despite its varied answer pool, this study predominantly covered results observed for individuals in Bulgaria, and as such, is limited to the experiences of people who were isolated within this specific country. Future research on the topic of PSRs formed in isolation could potentially utilize an expansion of the scope to fit a multi-country global perspective with a more stable participant representation; or could replicate the narrative of this thesis and narrow the scope to another country which experienced similar isolation restrictions, and thus form a comparative study.

In terms of the scope of the research itself, a future study of this kind would benefit from having more survey questions relating to PSI in isolation, especially if it employs paid participants with unlimited amount of time, as the current thesis made a conscious effort to tackle efficiency and limited the number of questions presented to survey respondents to only the necessary ones. A few possible directions for additional questions could involve a heavier focus on the notion of wishful identification, as well as a comprehensive approach to the sensitive nature of mental health during isolation and parasocial behaviour as a coping mechanism.



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## Appendix 1: Survey Questions

<b>№</b>	<b>Question</b>	<b>Answers</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Theoretical connection</b>
Q1	Please select your current age	18-24; 25-34; 35-55; 55+	Single choice	Sociodemographic characterization
Q2	Please select your gender	Male; Female; Other	Single choice	Sociodemographic characterization
Q3	What was your employment status during the Covid-19 isolation (January 2020 to January 2021)?	Full time employment; Part-time employment; Self-employed; Student; Housemaker; Unemployed; Retired	Single choice	Sociodemographic characterization
Q4	Where did you perform your daily activities during the period (January 2020 - January 2021)?	Mostly at home (remote working/ remote studying/ housemaking/maternity leave etc.); Mixed – at home and outside; Mostly outside (working from an office/ attending studying facilities etc.); Other:	Single choice	Sociodemographic characterization
Q5	In what country were you based at during the majority of your overall Covid-19 isolation?	Bulgaria; Sweden; U.K.; Other:	Single choice/ Open-ended option	Sociodemographic characterization
Q6	Were you located in a major city or in a smaller city/countryside?	Major city; Smaller city/countryside	Single choice	Sociodemographic characterization; Social isolation; Loneliness;
Q7	How many people did you have in the household at the time of your isolation?	I was alone; With one other person; 2-3 other people in the household; 4 or more people in the household	Single choice	Study-specific characterization; Social isolation; Loneliness;
Q8	Did you have a significant other during your time in isolation and did you live together?	Yes, we lived together; Yes, we did not live together; No, I did not have a partner	Single choice	Sociodemographic characterization; Social isolation; Loneliness;



Q9	How much time did you spend online during your isolation, in comparison to the time before that?	I spent more time online than usual; About the same amount; I spent less time online than usual	Single choice	Media usage; Social isolation;
Q10	What social media platforms did you mostly use during your time in isolation? Pick as many as relevant.	Facebook; Instagram; TikTok; Twitter/X; Reddit; YouTube; Twitch; Discord; VLive/Weverse/Amino; Other	Scale (None – Monthly – Weekly – Daily – Hourly)	Media usage; Social isolation;
Q11	What types of activities brought you comfort during your time in isolation? Pick your top five.	Watching TV shows and movies; Reading books, magazines, journaling etc.; Listening to music; Playing games; Picking up a new at-home hobby; Picking up a new at-home sport; Finding a new educational endeavor – learning a skill, a language etc.; Browsing the news; Online shopping; Practicing self-care and hygiene; Spending time with people at home; Spending time with people online; Creating – writing books, making videos, drawing etc.; Other:	Multiple choice/ Open-ended option	Study-specific characterization; Social isolation; Loneliness;
Q12	Did you find any new social media accounts to follow during your time in isolation? Do you still follow them?	I did, and I still follow them; I did, but I do not follow them anymore; I did, I follow some of them; I did not find any new accounts	Single choice	Media usage; Social isolation; Loneliness; PSBR;
Q13	What types of accounts did you browse on a daily basis during your isolation? Choose your top three.	Friends and family accounts; Celebrity accounts; Content creators and influencer accounts; Pet accounts; News accounts; Funny/lighthearted accounts; Business accounts (restaurants, hotels, brands etc.); Educational accounts; Niche accounts (connected to your personal interests)	Single choice	Media usage; Social isolation; Loneliness; Wishful identification;
Q14	How often did you engage in social media interactions (liking, commenting, sharing) during your time in isolation, in comparison to the time before January 2020?	I engaged more than usual; About the same amount; I engaged less than usual; I do not normally engage with others on social media	Single choice	Media usage; Social isolation; Loneliness;
Q15	During isolation did you predominantly tend to get drawn to a certain media (books, films, music, art, sports etc.) because of the content	More because of the content; More because of the person; Both	Single choice	Media usage; Loneliness; Wishful identification; Escapism;



	itself, or because of the person or people showcasing it or associated with it?			
Q16	How attached or involved did you feel with the stories and people you have seen online during your isolation?	Scale (1–7)	Scale (1–7)	Attachment theory; PSI; PSR; PSROM; Wishful identification;
Q15	How lonely did you feel during your time in isolation?	Scale (1–7)	Scale (1–7)	Social isolation; Loneliness;
Q16	How much did being online help you in feeling less lonely during quarantine?	Scale (1–7)	Scale (1–7)	Social isolation; Loneliness;
Q17	How stable would you say your mental health was during the pandemic?	Scale (1–7)	Scale (1–7)	Social isolation; Loneliness;
Q18	During your isolation did you find yourself more invested in news about celebrities, influencers or fictional characters as compared to your time before isolation?	Yes; No;	Single choice	Social isolation; Attachment theory; PSI; PSR; PSROM; Wishful identification;
Q19	During your isolation did you feel more personally attached to experiences related to or shared by celebrities, influencers or fictional characters than before isolation?	Yes; No;	Single choice	Attachment theory; PSI; PSR; PSROM; Wishful identification;
Q20	Do you normally get invested or attached to stories relating to celebrities, influencers or fictional characters, even outside of isolation?	Yes; No;	Single choice	Attachment theory; PSI; PSR; PSROM; Wishful identification;
Q21	During isolation, did you wish or imagine meeting some of the people you have seen or interacted with online?	Yes; No;	Single choice	PSI; PSR; PSROM;
Q22	If you answered "yes" to the previous question, would you like to share what was the context? What did you imagine? Why did you wish to meet them? If you answered "no", please skip to the next question.	N/A	Open-ended	PSI; PSR; PSROM;
Q23	Did you have a "comfort person" during your time in isolation? Someone who made you feel safe, happy and was a	Yes, someone I know in real life; Yes, a celebrity or an influencer; Yes, a fictional character; Yes, other;; No	Multiple-choice/ Open-ended option	Attachment theory; PSI; PSR; PSROM; Loneliness;





	positive presence to you. It could be more than one person.			
Q24	Do you still follow or keep in contact with your “comfort person”?	Yes; No; Occasionally; Not applicable (I had no “comfort person”)	Single choice	Attachment theory; PSI; PSR; PSROM; PSBR;
Q25	During isolation did you ever contribute financially to someone you have seen online? What was the reason?	Yes – donating for a cause or a campaign endorsed by them; Yes – through Twitch/Patreon/Ko-fi for exclusive content; Yes – buying merchandise to support the creator; Yes – to help with Covid-related financial struggles; Yes, other:: No	Multiple-choice/ Open-ended option	Attachment theory; PSI; PSR; Monetization;
Q26	Did you find yourself making more financial contributions to creators during isolation in comparison to before January 2020?	I contributed more than usual; About the same amount; I contributed less than usual; I do not normally contribute financially	Single choice	Attachment theory; PSI; PSR; Monetization;
27	During isolation did you feel like posts made by internet figures were more relatable to you?	Yes; About the same amount; No	Single choice	Attachment theory; PSI; PSR;
Q28	During isolation did you find a “celebrity crush” or someone you admired very much?	Yes, I did and I followed them on their social media; Yes, but I did not follow them on social media; No, I was already following my celebrity crush; No, I have no such person	Single choice	Attachment theory; PSI; PSR; PSROM;
Q29	Thank you! If you are okay with being contacted for additional questions, feel free to leave your email, otherwise leave blank. Your contact details will be deleted in 3 months or if not used:	N/A	Open-ended	N/A



## Appendix 2: Interview Questions

<b>№</b>	<b>Question</b>	<b>Theoretical connection</b>
EQ1	How would you describe your community and your dynamics with them?	General information; PSI; PSR;
EQ2	How often did you interact with your community before, during and after isolation? What ways of communication did you use?	General information; PSI; PSR; PSBR;
EQ3	Was content creation before, during and after the pandemic any different? If so, how?	General information PSI; PSR;
EQ4	How close would you consider yourself to be with your community?	Attachment theory; PSI; PSR;
EQ5	Have you noticed members of your community trying to form a closer relationship with you? How do you feel about that?	Attachment theory; PSI; PSR; PSROM;
EQ6	Did you notice any difference in the growth of your community during the pandemic?	Attachment theory; PSI; PSR; PSROM;
EQ7	Have you noticed any changes in the communication style of your community during the pandemic as opposed to now?	Attachment theory; PSI; PSR; PSROM;
EQ8	Has any member of your community mentioned you/reached out to you during the pandemic to seek comfort or advice in you? How about more recently?	Attachment theory; PSI; PSR; PSROM;
EQ9	Did people donate/buy more during isolation as compared to before? What do you think the reason was?	Attachment theory; PSI; PSR; Monetization;
EQ10	How did interacting with your community during isolation reflect on you, on a personal level?	Attachment theory; PSI; PSR;
EQ11	Do you have any parasocial relationships with other media personae? Did that change during isolation?	Attachment theory; PSI; PSR;
EQ12	You have a spouse in real life. How has your community treated this portion of your personal life? Have you noticed any difference in their reactions to topics relating to your spouse, especially during isolation?	PSI; PSR; PSROM; Wishful identification



EQ13	Is there anything else you want to share based on your experiences of content creator and on the topic of isolation and specifically our social relationships anything you can think of?	N/A
For EXP1 Only	In 2023 you hosted a real-life meetup. How was the dynamic then? Did you feel like some of the people were maybe knew too much about you? Were they infringing on anything?	Attachment theory; PSI; PSR; PSROM;
For EXP1 Only	(After mentioning boundaries) Would you mind elaborating on how people overstepped this line between you as a person and you as a creator?	Attachment theory; PSI; PSR; PSROM;
For EXP2 Only	You are currently taking a break from social media. Would you mind sharing what prompted this decision?	PSI; PSR; PSBR;
For EXP2 Only	Have you noticed people forming parasocial relations with the animals (parrots) showcased in your channel, and did isolation make a difference in their perception of them?	Attachment theory; PSI; PSR;