

Influence of Parasocial Relationship on Coping Strategies, Mental Well-Being, And Social Engagement Among Secondary School Students in Jos North Local Government Area of Plateau State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined parasocial relationships and their association with coping strategies, mental well-being, and social engagement among secondary school students in Jos North Local Government Area, Plateau State, Nigeria. A descriptive survey design was adopted. The population consisted of 6,639 Senior Secondary School Two (SS2) students from 26 public secondary schools, from which a sample of 253 students was selected using a multistage sampling technique. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire measuring parasocial relationships, coping strategies, mental well-being, and social engagement. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while Pearson Product–Moment Correlation was used to test the hypotheses. The findings revealed that students commonly develop parasocial relationships with media personalities and frequently engage with media content as a coping strategy during stressful situations. Students also reported positive emotional experiences such as improved mood, relaxation, and reduced loneliness when engaging with media figures. However, frequent media engagement was also associated with patterns of reduced face-to-face social interaction. The findings highlight the need for balanced media engagement and supportive environments that promote healthy coping and social interaction among adolescents. The study recommended that Schools should incorporate media literacy programmes that help students understand the role of media personalities and encourage responsible media engagement.

Keywords: Parasocial relationships, coping strategies, mental well-being, social engagement, secondary school students

Introduction

Adolescence represents a critical stage of human development characterised by rapid emotional, psychological, and social transformations. During this period, secondary school students actively search for identity, emotional support, and social belonging while simultaneously navigating academic expectations, peer interactions, and personal challenges. In recent decades, these developmental experiences have increasingly been shaped by digital media environments where adolescents encounter a wide range of media personalities such as musicians, actors, social media influencers, and fictional characters. Continuous exposure to these figures often leads adolescents to form emotionally meaningful yet one-sided connections known as parasocial relationships.

Parasocial relationships refer to the illusion of intimacy and emotional connection that audiences develop with media figures who are unaware of their existence. Although such relationships lack reciprocal interaction, they are psychologically experienced as meaningful and emotionally engaging (Hoffner & Bond, 2022). Contemporary research has further extended this concept to include parasocial emotion regulation, which describes the tendency of individuals to rely on admired media personalities to regulate emotions, cope with stress, and alleviate feelings of loneliness or distress. It appears that adolescents may increasingly turn to these symbolic relationships for emotional reassurance, companionship, and comfort, particularly when real-life support systems appear insufficient or inaccessible. The growing emotional reliance on media personalities has important implications for adolescents' coping strategies. Coping strategies refer to the cognitive and behavioural efforts individuals employ to manage internal and external stressors. Effective coping strategies typically involve problem solving, seeking social support, and constructive emotional expression, whereas maladaptive strategies often involve avoidance, withdrawal, or passive emotional regulation. When adolescents frequently depend on parasocial emotion regulation, media engagement may become a substitute for active coping, potentially encouraging emotional avoidance rather than direct problem resolution. Conversely, positive media role models may also inspire resilience, perseverance, and adaptive coping behaviours. This dual possibility suggests that parasocial relationships may shape adolescents' coping patterns in both beneficial and detrimental ways.

In addition to coping strategies, parasocial emotion regulation may influence adolescents' mental well-being. Mental well-being encompasses emotional stability, psychological functioning, and the ability to manage stress effectively. Adolescents who derive comfort from parasocial bonds may experience temporary emotional relief and perceived companionship, which could buffer feelings of loneliness and distress. However, excessive emotional dependence on symbolic relationships may weaken real interpersonal connections and heighten vulnerability to anxiety, emotional dissatisfaction, or social withdrawal when the perceived bond fails to meet psychological needs (McAlister, Wilson, & Grant, 2024). Consequently, the nature and intensity of parasocial engagement may play a significant role in shaping adolescents' emotional health. Another important area potentially affected by parasocial emotion regulation is social engagement. Social engagement refers to active participation in peer interactions, school activities, and broader social relationships that contribute to adolescents' sense of belonging and social competence. Healthy engagement within the school environment promotes communication skills, cooperation, empathy, and emotional development. However, strong emotional investment in media personalities may compete with real-life social interactions, potentially reducing adolescents' motivation to participate in face-to-face relationships or school-based social activities. It appears that when symbolic relationships become emotionally dominant, adolescents may gradually substitute mediated connections for direct social engagement.

The rapid expansion of social media platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook has intensified adolescents' opportunities to develop parasocial bonds with media figures. These platforms encourage continuous interaction with celebrity content through likes, comments, livestreams, and algorithm-driven recommendations that create the illusion of closeness and accessibility. As a result, adolescents may increasingly rely on these mediated interactions as sources of emotional validation and companionship. While such experiences may offer short-term emotional support, their broader implications for adolescents' coping behaviours, psychological well-being, and social participation remain a subject of growing scholarly concern. Within the school environment, particularly among secondary school students, emotional regulation, coping behaviours, and social engagement are essential components of healthy development and academic adjustment. Students in Jos North Local Government Area of Plateau State are exposed to increasing digital media influence alongside academic pressure, peer expectations, and socio-economic challenges. In such circumstances,

parasocial emotion regulation may emerge as a convenient strategy for managing stress and emotional discomfort. However, the extent to which this phenomenon shapes students' coping strategies, mental well-being, and social engagement remains insufficiently explored within the Nigerian context.

Despite the increasing prominence of parasocial relationships in adolescents' everyday lives, empirical research examining their psychological and social implications in Nigeria remains limited, particularly among secondary school students. Existing studies have largely focused on general media consumption or social media addiction, with little attention given to the emotional regulatory functions of parasocial relationships and their potential influence on adolescents' coping strategies, mental well-being, and social engagement. This study therefore seeks to examine the influence of parasocial emotion regulation on coping strategies, mental well-being, and social engagement among secondary school students in Jos North Local Government Area, Plateau State, with the aim of contributing empirical evidence that can inform educational, psychological, and counselling interventions for healthier adolescent development.

Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated to guide the study:

1. What is the level of parasocial relationship among secondary school students in Jos North Local Government Area of Plateau State?
2. What coping strategies are commonly used by students in Jos North Local Government Area of Plateau State?
3. What is the level of mental well-being among students in Jos North Local Government Area of Plateau State?
4. What is the level of social engagement among students in Jos North Local Government Area of Plateau State?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance:

1. There is no significant relationship between parasocial relationship and coping strategies used by secondary school students in Jos North Local Government Area of Plateau State.

2. There is no significant relationship between parasocial relationship and mental well-being among secondary school students in Jos North Local Government Area of Plateau State.
3. There is no significant relationship between parasocial relationship and social engagement among secondary school students in Jos North Local Government Area of Plateau State.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. This design is appropriate for studies that aim to examine existing conditions and relationships among variables within a population without manipulating them (Creswell, 2018). It enabled the researcher to assess the level of parasocial relationships among students and examine their associations with coping strategies, mental well-being, and social engagement in their natural school environment.

The population consisted of 6,639 Senior Secondary School Two (SS2) students in the 26 government secondary schools in Jos North Local Government Area of Plateau State. SS2 students were considered appropriate because they represent adolescents in mid-secondary education who are actively engaged with digital media while still relatively stable within the school system compared to SS1 students adjusting to the senior secondary curriculum and SS3 students preparing for external examinations.

A sample of 253 students was selected from the population using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination table, which provides statistically adequate sample sizes for given population levels. For populations above 6,000, the table recommends approximately 250 respondents, making the selected sample size adequate for representation.

A multistage sampling technique was employed to ensure representation across the study area. Cluster sampling was first used to group schools according to the 14 political wards in Jos North Local Government Area. Stratified sampling was then used to categorize students by gender, while simple random sampling was used to select participants within each stratum, thereby reducing sampling bias and ensuring equal selection chances.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire titled Parasocial Relationship, Coping Strategies, Mental Well-being, and Social Engagement Questionnaire (PRCMSE-Q). The instrument consisted of

five sections: Section A collected demographic information, while Sections B, C, D, and E measured parasocial relationships, coping strategies, mental well-being, and social engagement respectively. The items were structured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1), which allows respondents to indicate varying degrees of agreement with each statement and facilitates quantitative analysis of psychosocial constructs.

Content validity was established through expert review by specialists in Educational Psychology and Measurement and Evaluation at the University of Jos. Their observations were used to refine the instrument before final administration. Construct validity was assessed using Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value of 0.812 indicated adequate sampling, while Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($p < 0.001$), confirming that the data were suitable for factor analysis. All retained items recorded factor loadings above 0.50. Reliability was determined using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. The reliability indices for the subscales ranged from 0.83 to 0.88, indicating high internal consistency of the instrument.

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from relevant educational authorities and the principals of the selected schools. Questionnaires were administered to respondents with the assistance of trained research assistants during designated free periods. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality, and participation was voluntary. Completed questionnaires were retrieved immediately after completion.

The collected data were coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC) was used to test the hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance. Correlation analysis was appropriate because the study examined the strength and direction of relationships among the variables rather than causal effects.

The questionnaire items were rated on a five-point Likert scale of Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Undecided (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1).

The criterion mean of 3.00 was obtained by dividing the sum of the scale values by the number of response options: $\frac{5+4+3+2+1}{5} = 3.00$. Therefore, any mean score equal to or greater than 3.00 indicates agreement, while any mean score below 3.00 indicates disagreement.

Results

Research Question One: What is the level of parasocial relationship among secondary school students in Jos North Local Government Area of Plateau State?

Table 1: Mean Responses on Parasocial Relationship

S/N	Item/Statement	Mean	Std. Dev.	Decision
1	I feel emotionally close to my favourite celebrity.	3.89	1.02	Agreed
2	I feel that my favourite media personality understands me.	3.51	1.08	Agreed
3	I see my favourite celebrity as someone I can relate to personally.	3.57	1.12	Agreed
4	I feel happy when I see or hear from my favourite media personality.	4.02	0.96	Agreed
5	I feel disappointed when I miss content from my favourite celebrity.	3.30	1.09	Agreed
6	I often imagine what it would be like to interact personally with my favourite celebrity.	3.60	1.13	Agreed
7	I feel offended when someone says something hurtful about my favourite celebrity.	3.47	1.10	Agreed
8	I feel connected to my favourite celebrity even though we have never met.	3.72	1.05	Agreed
9	I admire my favourite media personality and try to be like them.	3.72	1.04	Agreed
10	I am willing to give my favourite celebrity gifts if I have the means.	4.18	0.89	Agreed
	Sectional Mean	3.70	1.06	Agreed

Criterion Mean = 3.00 N = 253

Table 1 presents the mean responses of 253 students on their parasocial relationships with media figures. All ten items recorded mean scores above the criterion mean of 3.00, indicating general agreement with the statements describing parasocial engagement. The highest mean score was recorded

for the statement “I am willing to give my favourite celebrity gifts if I have the means” (M = 4.18), followed by “I feel happy when I see or hear from my favourite media personality” (M = 4.02). The sectional mean of 3.70 suggests that students generally report experiencing parasocial relationships with media figures.

Research Question Two: What coping strategies are commonly used by students in Jos North Local Government Area?

Table 2: Mean Responses on Coping Strategies

S/N	Item/Statement	Mean	Std. Dev.	Decision
1	Thinking about my favourite media personality helps me cope with stress.	3.58	1.12	Agreed
2	I watch or follow media personalities when I feel overwhelmed.	3.73	1.10	Agreed
3	I use content from celebrities to distract myself from problems.	3.79	1.08	Agreed
4	Advice or messages from media figures help me deal with challenges.	3.44	1.13	Agreed
5	I feel calmer after engaging with content from my favourite celebrity.	3.70	1.06	Agreed
6	I rely on media content rather than talking to people when stressed.	3.07	1.20	Agreed
7	Watching my favourite celebrity helps me forget my worries for a while.	3.75	1.09	Agreed
8	I feel encouraged to handle problems after watching media personalities.	3.60	1.11	Agreed
9	I turn to celebrities’ content instead of facing difficult emotions directly.	3.24	1.18	Agreed
10	Media figures influence how I deal with emotional difficulties.	3.45	1.14	Agreed
	Sectional Mean	3.54	1.14	Agreed

Criterion Mean = 3.00 N = 253

Table 2 presents students’ responses on coping strategies used when dealing with stress or emotional challenges. All ten items recorded mean scores above the criterion mean of 3.00, indicating agreement with the listed coping behaviours. Students particularly agreed that they use celebrity content to distract themselves from problems (M = 3.79) and that watching their favourite celebrities helps them forget

their worries temporarily ($M = 3.75$). The sectional mean of 3.54 suggests that students commonly engage with media personalities and their content as part of their coping behaviours.

Research Question Three: What is the level of mental well-being among students in Jos North Local Government Area?

Table 3: Mean Responses on Mental Well-being

S/N	Item/Statement	Mean	Std. Dev.	Decision
1	Following my favourite celebrity improves my mood.	3.92	1.00	Agreed
2	I feel less lonely when I engage with media personalities.	3.57	1.14	Agreed
3	I feel emotionally stable after watching content I enjoy.	3.47	1.15	Agreed
4	I feel happy most of the time because of the media content I consume.	3.26	1.18	Agreed
5	Media personalities help me feel emotionally supported.	3.50	1.13	Agreed
6	I feel anxious when I cannot access content from my favourite celebrity.	2.92	1.22	Disagreed
7	Following media figures helps me manage negative emotions.	3.59	1.12	Agreed
8	I feel motivated and hopeful after engaging with celebrity content.	3.69	1.09	Agreed
9	My emotional well-being depends on the media content I consume.	2.97	1.21	Disagreed
10	I feel mentally relaxed after spending time with media personalities.	3.71	1.10	Agreed
	Sectional Mean	3.46	1.16	Agreed
Criterion Mean = 3.00		N = 253		

Table 3 presents students' responses regarding their mental well-being. Eight of the ten items recorded mean scores above the criterion mean of 3.00, indicating agreement with several statements describing positive emotional experiences. However, two items relating to anxiety when unable to access celebrity content ($M = 2.92$) and dependence on media for emotional well-being ($M = 2.97$) recorded mean scores below the criterion mean. The sectional mean of 3.46 suggests that students generally report a moderate level of mental well-being.

Research Question Four: What is the level of social engagement among students in Jos North Local Government Area?

Table 4: Mean Responses on Social Engagement

S/N	Item/Statement	Mean	Std. Dev.	Decision
1	I prefer spending time with media content rather than interacting with friends.	3.29	1.20	Agreed
2	I often watch or stream content even when people are around me.	3.57	1.12	Agreed
3	I feel more connected to celebrities than to my peers.	3.14	1.18	Agreed
4	I ignore people around me because I am focused on media content.	3.43	1.15	Agreed
5	I would rather stay online than attend social gatherings.	3.35	1.17	Agreed
6	I spend less time talking with family because of media consumption.	3.34	1.16	Agreed
7	Media personalities take my attention away from real-life relationships.	3.42	1.14	Agreed
8	I feel uncomfortable socializing without access to my phone or media.	3.63	1.10	Agreed
9	I prefer online engagement over face-to-face interaction.	3.51	1.13	Agreed
10	My interest in social activities has reduced because of my attachment to media figures.	3.22	1.19	Agreed
Sectional Mean		3.39	1.17	Agreed

Criterion Mean = 3.00 N = 253

Table 4 presents students' responses regarding their social engagement and media use patterns. All ten items recorded mean scores above the criterion mean of 3.00, indicating agreement with the statements describing various patterns of media engagement during social situations. For instance, students agreed that they often watch or stream media content even when people are around them (M = 3.57) and that they feel uncomfortable socializing without access to their phone or media (M = 3.63). The sectional mean of 3.39 indicates noticeable engagement with media content alongside students' social interactions.

Hypothesis One: There is no significant relationship between parasocial relationships and coping strategies among students.

Table 5: Summary of Pearson Product Moment Correlation between parasocial relationships and coping strategies among students

Variable	N	Mean	S.D	DF	R	P Value	Decision
Parasocial Relationships	253	3.70	1.06	251	0.52	0.001	H ₀ Rejected
Coping Strategies	253	3.54	1.14				

Table 5 presents the Pearson Product Moment Correlation examining the relationship between parasocial relationships and coping strategies among secondary school students in Jos North Local Government Area of Plateau State, Nigeria. The results show a positive correlation ($r = 0.52$) between parasocial relationships and coping strategies. This indicates that higher levels of parasocial relationships are associated with higher levels of engagement with media personalities as part of students' coping behaviours. The correlation is statistically significant at $p = 0.001$, which is less than the 0.05 level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. This means that there is a statistically significant relationship between parasocial relationships and coping strategies among the students.

Hypothesis Two: There is no significant relationship between parasocial relationships and mental well-being among students.

Table 6: Summary of Pearson Product Moment Correlation between parasocial relationships and mental well-being among students

Variable	N	Mean	S.D	DF	R	P Value	Decision
Parasocial Relationships	253	3.70	1.06	251	0.48	0.001	H ₀ Rejected
Mental Well-being	253	3.46	1.16				

Table 6 presents the Pearson Product Moment Correlation examining the relationship between parasocial relationships and mental well-being among secondary school students in Jos North Local Government Area of Plateau State, Nigeria. The results show a positive correlation ($r = 0.48$) between parasocial relationships and mental well-being. This indicates that higher levels of parasocial engagement are associated with higher levels of reported emotional comfort and mood improvement

among the students. The relationship is statistically significant at $p = 0.001$, which is below the 0.05 level of significance. Since the p-value is less than the significance level, the null hypothesis is rejected. This indicates that a statistically significant relationship exists between parasocial relationships and students' mental well-being.

Hypothesis Three: There is no significant relationship between parasocial relationships and social engagement among students.

Table 7: Summary of Pearson Product Moment Correlation between parasocial relationships and social engagement among students

Variable	N	Mean	S.D	DF	R	P Value	Decision
Parasocial Relationships	253	3.70	1.06	251	-0.45	0.001	H ₀ Rejected
Social Engagement	253	3.39	1.17				

Table 6 presents the Pearson Product Moment Correlation examining the relationship between parasocial relationships and mental well-being among secondary school students in Jos North Local Government Area of Plateau State, Nigeria. The results show a positive correlation ($r = 0.48$) between parasocial relationships and mental well-being. This indicates that higher levels of parasocial engagement are associated with higher levels of reported emotional comfort and mood improvement among the students. The relationship is statistically significant at $p = 0.001$, which is below the 0.05 level of significance. Since the p-value is less than the significance level, the null hypothesis is rejected. This indicates that a statistically significant relationship exists between parasocial relationships and students' mental well-being.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that secondary school students in Jos North Local Government Area commonly experience parasocial relationships with media figures. The high mean scores recorded across the parasocial relationship items suggest that many students feel emotionally connected to media personalities and experience positive emotions when engaging with their content. This pattern reflects the increasing role of digital and social media environments in facilitating perceived intimacy between audiences and media figures. The finding supports the foundational explanation of Donald Horton and Richard Wohl in the concept of Parasocial Interaction Theory, which proposes that repeated exposure

to media personalities can lead audiences to develop one-sided emotional bonds that resemble real interpersonal relationships. Similar observations have been reported in more recent studies which show that adolescents frequently form strong emotional attachments to influencers and celebrities due to constant media exposure and interactive digital platforms (Bond, 2020; Tukachinsky, 2023).

The study also found that students frequently engage with media personalities and their content as a means of coping with stress and emotional challenges. Many respondents reported watching or following media figures when feeling overwhelmed and using celebrity content as a form of distraction from personal problems. These findings suggest that media engagement may function as an emotion-focused coping mechanism among adolescents. This interpretation aligns with previous research indicating that parasocial figures often serve as sources of comfort, emotional regulation, and temporary escape during stressful experiences (Dibble, Hartmann, and Rosaen, 2016; Greenwood and Long, 2020; Tukachinsky and Stever, 2019). However, the tendency to rely on mediated content rather than interpersonal communication may also reflect limited access to supportive social networks or a preference for private coping strategies among students.

With respect to mental well-being, the findings indicate that engagement with media personalities is associated with several positive emotional experiences, including improved mood, feelings of relaxation, and reduced loneliness. These results suggest that parasocial engagement may provide short-term psychological benefits by offering emotional companionship and motivational cues. Similar outcomes have been documented in studies which show that mediated relationships can temporarily satisfy social and emotional needs, particularly among adolescents and young adults (Derrick, Gabriel, and Tippin, 2008; Valkenburg, Peter, and Schouten, 2022). However, the relatively lower mean scores for items related to anxiety and emotional dependency indicate that most students in this study had not developed strong psychological reliance on media personalities. This suggests that parasocial engagement in this context may function primarily as a supplementary emotional resource rather than a substitute for real social support.

The findings further reveal patterns of media engagement that may influence students' real-life social interaction. Many respondents reported spending significant time engaging with media content even when others were present and showing preference for online or media-related activities over face-to-

face interaction. These patterns suggest that extensive media engagement may compete with opportunities for direct social interaction. Previous studies have similarly reported that strong parasocial involvement and heavy media consumption can sometimes reduce participation in offline social activities and interpersonal communication (Chung and Cho, 2017; Lim and Kim, 2022; de Backer, Nelissen, and Vyncke, 2021). Nevertheless, it is important to note that such patterns do not necessarily imply complete social withdrawal, but rather reflect changing forms of social engagement among adolescents in increasingly digital media environments.

Conclusion

The study examined parasocial relationships among secondary school students in Jos North Local Government Area and their association with coping strategies, mental well-being, and social engagement. The findings show that students commonly experience parasocial relationships with media figures and frequently engage with media content as a coping strategy when dealing with stress or emotional challenges. The results also indicate that students report positive emotional experiences such as improved mood, motivation, and reduced feelings of loneliness when engaging with media personalities. In addition, students reported patterns of media engagement that occur alongside their social interactions. These findings suggest that media personalities and digital content form part of the emotional and social experiences of students in the study area.

Recommendations

1. Schools should incorporate media literacy programmes that help students understand the role of media personalities and encourage responsible media engagement.
2. Teachers should guide students in developing diverse coping strategies, including interpersonal communication and problem-solving skills, in addition to media-based coping behaviours.
3. Parents should encourage balanced media use at home by promoting healthy media habits and maintaining open communication with their children.
4. School counselors should provide guidance on emotional well-being, helping students develop healthy ways of managing stress and emotional challenges.

5. Future researchers should further investigate parasocial relationships among adolescents, particularly examining their long-term effects on psychological well-being and social interaction.

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