

## The Influence of a Scandal on Parasocial Relationship, Parasocial Interaction, and Parasocial Breakup

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The present study of parasocial interaction (PSI), parasocial relationships (PSR), and parasocial breakup (PSB) investigates the relationship between PSI and PSR, the influence of scandal on PSR, PSB, and PSI, and the effect of program type on PSI. Using a  $2 \times 2$  design, a between-subjects experiment was conducted. PSI was positively related to PSR in 3 of the 4 conditions. A scandal involving an actor negatively influenced people's PSR with him. The stronger their PSR with the actor, the more PSB the participants experienced after the introduction of scandal. PSI with a character played by an actor in a movie was significantly higher than PSI with that actor as a guest on a talk show.

**Keywords:** scandal, parasocial interaction, parasocial relationship, parasocial breakup

Parasocial interaction (PSI), a term first used by Horton and Wohl (1956), refers to the “simulacrum of conversational give and take” between audience members and media figures and characters. These figures and characters are called “personae” (the single form is “persona”). This interaction only exists as the audience members’ illusion, which “characteristically is one-sided, nondialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible of mutual development” (p. 215). However, although PSI is the subjective invention of audience members, they regard it as genuine and interpret personae’s behavior as reciprocal. Therefore, parasocially active audience members are not passive viewers, but active participants during their viewing processes (Levy, 1979).

A large body of literature has examined PSI’s causes, development, consequences, character-

istics, and functions (see review in Giles, 2002 and Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006). In the past few years, researchers have explored several new aspects of PSI, such as the differences between PSI and parasocial relationship (PSR; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Hartmann, Stuke, & Daschmann, 2008; Klimmt et al., 2006; Schramm, 2008; Schramm & Hartmann, 2008), parasocial breakup (PSB; E. Cohen, 2010; J. Cohen, 2003, 2004; Eyal & J. Cohen, 2006; Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011), PSI with different types of personae (Schramm & Wirth, 2010), and PSI with disliked personae (Dibble & Rosaen, 2011; Tian & Hoffner, 2010).

Despite the fast development of PSI research, there are a few weaknesses in the existing literature. First, PSI and PSR are used interchangeably, which has caused both conceptual and operational confusions. Second, most current PSB research explores involuntary PSB, while audience members’ voluntary PSB is seldom examined. Third, researchers have only studied audience members’ PSI with persona(e) in a certain type of program (e.g., news, sitcoms, reality shows, etc.), but people’s PSI with the same media figure(s) across different types of programs remains unexplored.

Therefore, there are three goals for this study. First, it investigates the distinctions and connections between PSI and PSR. Second, it examines the effects of an actor’s scandal on people’s

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PSR, PSB, and PSI with him. Third, it explores the influence of program type (a movie and a talk show featuring the same actor) on audience members' PSI with the actor and the character he plays in the programs.

### Parasocial Interaction and Parasocial Relationship

In the first study of PSI, Horton and Wohl (1956) treated PSI as both an illusive interaction and a bond of intimacy. Accordingly, two lines of research on this concept are formed since then. The first, PSI studies, examines it as interaction, while the second line, PSR studies, investigates it as a relationship.

PSI studies primarily explore the effects of personae's verbal and nonverbal behavior on audience members' cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses during viewing. For example, Auter and Davis (1991) and Auter (1992) found that TV show hosts' "break the fourth wall" strategies (e.g., the show hosts looked directly at the viewers, talked to the audiences during the intro and postscript segments, or chatted with the audiences during sitcom shows) facilitated audience members' PSI. Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011) conducted a study to "revisit" Horton and Wohl's original PSI work. They found that viewers had stronger PSI experiences if a persona faced them directly and used a tone and wording that were suitable to the viewers.

By comparison, PSR studies treat PSR as a concept parallel to interpersonal relationship. Interpersonal relationship theories and models have received support in general in PSR research (Eyal & Dailey, 2012; Perse & R. B. Rubin, 1989; R. B. Rubin & McHugh, 1987), suggesting that PSR and interpersonal relationship are similar in development. Researchers have also examined PSR's influence on interpersonal relationships. For example, there is a vast array of literature exploring how PSR may serve as a functional alternative to satisfy people's social needs (Baek, Bae, & Jang, 2013; Cole & Leets, 1999; Conway & A. M. Rubin, 1991; Nordlund, 1978; Rafaeli, 1990; A. M. Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985; Rosengren & Windahl, 1972; Tsao, 1996; Turner, 1993).

However, throughout the history of PSI/PSR research, the two terms of PSI and PSR are often used interchangeably. Some studies use

the term PSI although their subject is PSR (Kassing & Sanderson, 2009; Rafaeli, 1990; R. B. Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Sood & Rogers, 2000). In a few widely used PSI scales, such as A. M. Rubin et al.'s (1985) PSI scale and Auter and Palmgreen's (2000) Audience-Persona Interaction Scale, the items that represent PSR (e.g., "I miss seeing my favorite TV personality when his or her program is not on") are mixed with the PSI items (e.g., "I sometimes make remarks to my favorite TV personality during their programs").

Recently, researchers have realized that the interchangeable use of PSI and PSR has caused both conceptual and operational confusions and thus, have attempted to differentiate between these two concepts. Giles (2002) pointed out that when audience members are parasocially interacting with personae, they use their personal knowledge to make judgments about the personae and generate further affective responses, but the interaction stays within the viewing episode. If the audience members are pleased with their PSI with certain personae, they may be involved in a variety of activities after viewing, such as imitating the personae's behavior, discussing the personae with other people, imagining interactions with the personae, or even attempting to contact the personae. Hartmann et al. (2008) proposed that PSI refers to "asymmetrical interactions that take place in situational processes of character perception and elaboration during media exposure" (p. 25), while PSR is "a cross-situational, stable, and schematic cognitive pattern of images and interactions scripts that includes affective aspects" (p. 26).

In this study, PSI was viewed as a situationally bound concept that occurs when audiences are using media. PSI begins when people encounter personae and ends when the encounter is over. In contrast, PSR was viewed as a long-term, enduring, and cross-situational concept. It can exist outside the media use process and intertwine with other aspects of audiences' lives, or, as Caughey (1984) puts it, "viewers may continue to engage in parasocial relationships when the set is turned off, just as people continue in interpersonal relationships when the other is not present" (as cited in R. B. Rubin & McHugh, 1987, p. 280).

Despite the distinctions between PSI and PSR, their connections should be recognized.

PSI as a situational involvement with personae may lead to PSR as a long-term personal relationship with them (Wirth, 2006). Through repeated PSI over time, audience members perceive certain personae to be more predictable and reliable and thus become more loyal to them (R. B. Rubin & McHugh, 1987). On the other hand, people's PSR with personae indicates an accumulation of shared past experiences and gives additional meanings to people's perception of personae in PSI (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Gleich (1997) proposed that "a first PSI sequence between a viewer and a persona is able to constitute a PSR, while this PSR in turn is able to influence future motivations and selection processes as well as PSI processes in subsequent media exposure sequences" (as cited in Schramm & Hartmann, 2008, p. 386). On the basis of previous literature, the author of the present study proposes that PSI reflects and facilitates PSR, while PSR relies on and strengthens PSI. Therefore, the first hypothesis is—

*H<sub>1</sub>*: There is a positive relationship between PSR and PSI.

### Parasocial Breakup

PSB is one of the recent developments in PSR research. PSB is defined as people's negative emotional reactions to termination of PSR with their liked personae (J. Cohen, 2003; Eyal & J. Cohen, 2006). Researchers have attempted to test whether the findings of interpersonal relationship dissolution can also be found in PSR termination, as interpersonal relationship and PSR share many of their emotional aspects (J. Cohen, 2003). In interpersonal communication literature, the consequences of relationship termination have been well documented (Barbara & Dion, 2000; Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; McCarthy, Lambert, & Brack, 1997). For example, McCarthy et al. (1997) found that relationship dissolution can cause serious emotional reactions that motivate people to seek psychological assistance.

In PSB literature, the patterns of PSB are found to resemble the patterns of interpersonal relationship dissolution. Although PSB with personae is less intense than dissolution with close relations, it is related to audience members' attachment styles with personae, and the

audience members with stronger PSR reported higher levels of PSB (J. Cohen, 2004; Eyal & J. Cohen, 2006). Moreover, J. Cohen (2003) found that teenagers experienced more PSB than adults, and audience members feared PSB with fictional personae more (e.g., sitcom characters) than with real personae (e.g., talk show hosts).

In J. Cohen's studies, the research participants were asked to imagine their reactions if their favorite personae disappeared from media. In comparison, Eyal and J. Cohen (2006) examined fans' reactions to a real PSB event (the end of the sitcom *Friends*). In this real situation, PSR was again found to be positively related to PSB. In addition, PSB was predicted by commitment to viewing the sitcom, affinity to the show, perceived popularity of the personae, and the audience members' loneliness. Furthermore, although women showed significantly stronger PSR than men, there was no significant gender difference in PSB.

Lather and Moyer-Guse (2011) investigated audience members' reactions to a disruption of TV programs due to a strike of writers between 2007 and 2008. They found that people with stronger PSR experienced greater PSB regardless of the number of programs that went off the air. Moreover, TV affinity, viewing TV shows for instrumental purposes, and viewing programs for companionship motives were also related to PSB.

Most PSB research focuses on hypothetical or real situations when personae are taken off the air. Quite a few researchers have pointed out that there are other possibilities of PSR dissolution. Eyal and J. Cohen (2006) contended that PSB may happen not only because a show ends or a character is taken off the show, but also because something happens to the actor or actress who plays the character. This can cause viewers to stop watching the show and become less interested in the character. J. Cohen (2003) suggested that researchers explore what happens if people decide to break off PSR. However, as far as the author of the present study is aware, there is only one study to date that addresses people's voluntary dissolution of PSR (E. Cohen, 2010). E. Cohen's survey study shows that PSB is influenced by the types of personae, the types of expectancy violations (moral, trust, and social), and audience gender.

Scandal is a common reason that people decide to discontinue their PSR with media figures. Scandals influence not only celebrities but also athletes, politicians, and other public figures. President Bill Clinton, actor Charlie Sheen, golfer Tiger Woods, and Coach Joseph Paterno have all suffered from their scandals. Kiouisis (2003) found that media coverage of the Clinton–Lewinsky scandal had a negative influence on people's favorability toward President Clinton. The negative effect of scandals may be caused by two factors: people's uncertainty about and expectations of public figures' behavior. Audience members' loyalty to media figures is positively related to their certainty about the figures (R. B. Rubin & McHugh, 1987), while deception and betrayal increase the uncertainty between people and can lead to the dissolution of friendships (McCornack & Levine, 1990; Honeycutt, 1985). Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that scandals, which add new and unpleasant uncertainty to PSR, can constitute barriers to the development of PSR. Furthermore, frequent, repetitive, and consistent contact with certain people cultivates a perceptual set toward them and produces expectations of how they would behave in future interaction (Burgoon & Walther, 1976). Violations of these expectations can result in negative reactions or even aggression (Haden & Hojjat, 2006). By the same token, scandals involving audience members' liked media figures may violate their expectations of them and thus undermine their PSR with them. Therefore, the second hypothesis is—

*H<sub>2</sub>:* The PSR of those audience members who learn of a scandal about a persona is significantly lower than the PSR of those who don't learn of a scandal about that persona.

Scandals may not influence each individual to the same degree, because different individuals may react differently to the same scandal (Kepplinger, Geiss, & Siebert, 2012). Research in premarital relationships has revealed that perceived closeness of the relationships is a predictor of emotional distress after dissolution (Simpson, 1987). Relational involvement is positively related to the intensity of the emotional reaction toward deception (McCornack & Levine, 1990). Furthermore, as mentioned ear-

lier, the PSB literature has shown that those with stronger PSR will experience higher levels of PSB if their favorite personae are no longer on the air (J. Cohen, 2004; Eyal & J. Cohen, 2006; Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011). Therefore, it is reasonable to predict that if a scandal occurs, audience members with stronger PSR will experience higher levels of PSB. The third hypothesis is—

*H<sub>3</sub>:* The higher the level of PSR with a persona, the more PSB audience members will experience when they learn of a scandal about that persona.

Scandals may constitute a threat not only to PSR, but also to audiences' further PSI with the personae. Giles (2002) pointed out that audience members' PSI with personae can be influenced by others, especially when there is a conflict between the audience members' positive impressions on the personae and others' opposite opinions. "If the user is highly influenced by peers, the discussion may substantially color the person judgments made in the next viewing episode" (p. 297). If people learn of a scandal about a certain persona, their PSI with the persona may be influenced negatively in their subsequent media use experience. Therefore, the fourth hypothesis is—

*H<sub>4</sub>:* The PSI for those audience members who learn of a scandal about a persona is significantly lower than the PSI of those who don't learn of the scandal about that persona.

Researchers have been studying people's PSI with a variety of personae, including newscasters, talk show hosts, reality show characters, sitcom characters, and novel characters. J. Cohen (2001) pointed out that the types of personae are related to the types of media texts, and the combination of specific types of personae and texts may influence people's reactions toward personae. Klimmt et al. (2006) proposed that PSI relies on the types of personae and researchers need to further examine whether what has been addressed as PSI is exactly similar across investigations conducted with different media and programs. Most PSI or PSR studies focus on one type of persona, while only a few researchers have attempted to examine people's PSI or PSR with different



types of personae. Turner (1993) examined PSI with TV newscasters, TV soap opera characters, and other TV performers and found that the variance in PSI explained by homophily and self-esteem differed by the types of TV personae. Schramm and Wirth (2010) tested their PSI-Process Scales (cognitive, affective, and behavioral) in audience members' PSI with three types of characters: nonmediated fictional characters (theater), mediated fictional characters (soap operas), and mediated nonfictional characters (quiz shows). They found that the same audience personalities facilitated PSI processes across all three conditions.

One actor or actress may play different roles in different programs and media, but the continuity of a persona's representations across different media outlets is generally overlooked in PSI literature (Giles, 2002). According to Giles (2002), there are three types of personae depending on their degree of authenticity. First-order personae refer to real people portraying themselves in media, such as talk show hosts and newscasters. Second-order personae are fictional roles played by real actors and actresses, such as movie and sitcom characters. Third-order personae are purely fictional characters without any real life counterparts, such as cartoon characters. Turner (1993) proposed that researchers should distinguish between PSI with an actual person and that with a character the person portrays. However, there is little research that addresses this issue directly.

In my view, people's PSI with an actual person is not restricted within a specific program or genre. Giles (2002) pointed out that an actor or actress may appear in different radio and TV programs as a performer or as a talk show guest, give interviews to magazines, and become the subject of discussion in newspapers. Accordingly, people come to know multiple aspects of the actor or actress through different media outlets. They not only see the actor's or actress's performing talent but also learn about his or her hobbies and personal life. In contrast, PSI with a certain fictional character usually occurs within the specific fictional world in which the character exists, although the same fictional world may take different forms in different media (e.g., the fictional world of *Harry Potter* depicted in the books, movies, and videogame, respectively). Because the character does not exist in real life, people's PSI with

him/her can hardly go beyond the context of the fictional world.<sup>1</sup> For example, people can have PSI with Rowan Atkinson being an actor, screenwriter, father, social activist, or car collector when he appears in different programs, while their PSI with Mr. Bean occurs primarily in the fictional world of the sitcom *Mr. Bean*.

Although people can differentiate between actors and the fictional characters in TV programs from childhood (Lemish, 1997; Morison, Kelley, & Gardner, 1981), their perception of actors can be influenced by the traits of fictional characters played by the actors (Tal-Or & Papirman, 2007). Tal-Or and Papirman found that audience members tended to evaluate an actor positively after they viewed the actor playing a positive movie character.

As a response to the lack of research differentiating between PSI with an actual person and PSI with a character the person portrays, a research question is proposed in this study:

*RQ:* Is there difference between PSI with an actor and PSI with a fictional character played by the actor?

## Method

### Sample

A total of 198 participants were recruited from a Midwestern liberal arts college for this study. The sample ranged in age from 17 to 42 ( $M = 20.07$ ,  $SD = 2.99$ ). Thirty-nine percent were male ( $N = 77$ ) and 61% were female ( $N = 121$ ). Eighty-six percent of the participants were White ( $N = 170$ ), 9% were African Americans ( $N = 18$ ), 2% were Latin Americans ( $N = 4$ ), and 3% ( $N = 6$ ) of the participants identified their ethnicity as "Others."

### Procedure

To test the hypotheses and the research question, a 2 (news story: scandal or no scandal)  $\times$

<sup>1</sup> Some movies are based on true stories, so the movie characters represent real people, such as U.S. General Patton (played by George C. Scott) in *Patton*, Chris Gardner (played by Will Smith) in *The Pursuit of Happyness*, and Coach Herman Boone (played by Denzel Washington) in *Remember the Titans*. It is possible that people already know different aspects of these real people before they watch the movies, and such knowledge influences their PSI with the movie characters during viewing.

2 (program type: movie or talk show) between-subjects factorial design was used. The actor chosen as the persona was George Clooney. This actor was selected because he is a well-known celebrity in the US, so the research participants were able to recognize him. Furthermore, around the time when the study was conducted, there were no noticeable negative or positive reports about George Clooney and the tone of the news about him was generally neutral.

At the beginning of the experiment, all the participants filled out a questionnaire testing their PSR with George Clooney as a pretest. Then the participants were randomly assigned to the following four conditions. In Condition 1 (scandal and movie,  $N = 50$ ), the participants read a news article said to be published in *The New York Times*: it was actually written by the researcher. The article was printed on a page with *The New York Times* logo on its top left margin, which looked like a news page from *The New York Times* Web site. The article was breaking news that George Clooney had been arrested for the physical assault of his actress girlfriend Stacy Kiebler. The article said that the incident happened at 12:30 a.m. on the day when the participants participated in the study. After reading the article, the participants were instructed to complete another questionnaire including the above-mentioned PSR scale as a posttest of PSR and a PSB scale measuring their reactions to this news. After that, they watched a 30-min movie clip. The movie clip was taken from a light comedy named *Intolerable Cruelty*. The comedy is about a romantic twist between a divorce attorney (played by George Clooney) and a woman who keeps marrying and divorcing rich men to become wealthy (played by Catherine Zeta-Jones). In the movie clip selected for this study, the majority of the plots (including the attorney's proposal, wedding ceremony, and his speech of resignation from a leading position in a legal association) featured the attorney. After watching the movie clip, the participants filled out a questionnaire composed of a scale measuring their PSI with the attorney when they were watching the movie clip.

In Condition 2 (no scandal and movie,  $N = 49$ ), the participants did not read the scandal article in Condition 1, but instead read an article about recent American college education innovations from *the Chronicle of Higher Educa-*

*tion*; the remaining steps were identical to those in Condition 1.

In Condition 3 (scandal and talk show,  $N = 49$ ), the participants first went through the same steps of reading the scandal news article and completing the posttest PSR and PSB questions as in Condition 1. Then the participants watched an episode of the *Late Show with David Letterman* in which George Clooney was the guest. In the episode, George Clooney conversed with David Letterman about his recent work and his relationship with several other celebrities. The length of the show was also approximately 30 min, similar to the length of the movie clip used in Condition 1. When the show was over, the participants also filled out the questionnaire of PSI scale. The PSI scale in this condition was the same as the one used in Condition 1 and 2, except that it asked about the participants' PSI with the guest in the talk show.

In Condition 4 (no scandal and talk show,  $N = 50$ ), the participants were first exposed to the first half of the procedure in Condition 2 (reading the article in *the Chronicle of Higher Education* and completing the PSR posttest and PSB questions) and then completed the second half of the procedure in Condition 3 (watching the talk show and completing the PSI scale of the talk show).

At the end of each condition, a debriefing was given to the participants before they left.

## Measures

In addition to such demographic variables as age, gender, and ethnicity, PSR, PSB, and PSI were measured.

**PSR.** PSR was measured with 20 items selected from the existing PSI or PSR scales (Auter, 1992; Auter & Palmgreen, 2000; Bocarnea & Brown, 2007; Levy, 1979; A. M. Rubin et al., 1985). As pointed out earlier, PSR and PSI have been used interchangeably, which causes conceptual and operational confusions. Because PSR in this study was regarded as a long-term and cross-situational concept, the items used to measure it reflected its enduring "relationship" feature, which persists beyond the moments when people use media. Therefore, the PSR measure used in this study included such items as "I find myself thinking about him on a regular basis" and "Sometimes I feel like calling or writing to him." In the pretest, the Cronbach's

alpha of the PSR scale was .84. In the posttest, the Cronbach's alpha of the PSR scale was .85.

**PSI.** PSI was measured with 14 items selected from the same existing PSI and PSR scales. In this study, PSI was viewed as a situationally bound concept which occurs during viewing. Therefore, the items used to measure it reflected the "interaction" characteristics. For instance, in the two movie conditions, the instruction said: "in this section, we'd like to know your thoughts toward the male movie character (the attorney) while you are watching this movie clip." The PSI scale included such items as "I sometimes tried to anticipate what he would do next while watching the movie" and "I sometimes make remarks to him while watching this movie." In the talk show conditions, the instructions and the items were adjusted accordingly. The Cronbach's alpha of the PSI scale by conditions were .87 (scandal and movie condition), .76 (no scandal and movie condition), .82 (scandal and talk show condition), and .84 (no scandal and talk show condition).

**PSB.** PSB was measured with 5 items selected from the 13-item PSB scale used in the studies by J. Cohen (2003) and Eyal and J. Cohen (2006). The original scale was used to measure audiences' reactions when their favorite characters went off the air. Here, the focus was on people's reactions when they learned of the scandal news, so the 5 items selected were those that could be applied to this study. The items asked the respondents how angry, sad, disappointed, betrayed, and lonely they felt when they read the news article. The scale's Cronbach's alpha was .65 after the loneliness item was removed because it would significantly lower the reliability if it were left in the scale.

All the items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). See Table 1 for the details of the measures.

Seven participants responded that they had watched the movie or the episode of the talk show before. Studies on repeated media exposure have shown that previous exposure can influence people's message acceptance, comprehension of the content, enjoyment of suspense, and character sympathy (Belch, 1982; Brewer, 1996; Crawley, Anderson, Wilder, Williams, & Santomero, 1999). Therefore, the

Table 1  
*Means and Standard Deviations of Pretest PSR, PSI, PSB, and Posttest PSR by Conditions*

Condition	Pretest PSR	PSI	PSB	Posttest PSR
1	2.23 (.47)	3.10 (.61)	2.61 (.51)	1.97 (.52)
2	2.31 (.36)	3.24 (.47)	2.73 (.55)	2.29 (.46)
3	2.37 (.43)	2.62 (.52)	2.62 (.57)	2.12 (.44)
4	2.30 (.46)	2.75 (.54)	3.02 (.56)	2.29 (.43)

Note. PSR = parasocial relationship; PSI = parasocial interaction; PSB = parasocial breakup.

data from those seven participants were not included in the analysis.

## Results

### Manipulation Check

Before testing the hypotheses, a manipulation check was conducted to test the validity of the experimental stimulus (the news article about George Clooney's scandal). I first compared the pretest and the posttest of PSR of those who read the scandal article. It was found that the posttest of PSR ( $M = 2.05$ ,  $SD = .48$ ) was significantly lower than the pretest of PSR ( $M = 2.30$ ,  $SD = .45$ ),  $t = 8.72$ ,  $p < .001$ . I then compared the pretest and the posttest of PSR of those who did not read the scandal article but read the news article in *the Chronicle of Higher Education*, and the posttest of PSR ( $M = 2.29$ ,  $SD = .44$ ) was not significantly different from the pretest of PSR ( $M = 2.31$ ,  $SD = .41$ ),  $t = .76$ ,  $p = .45$ . Therefore, the news article about George Clooney's scandal written by the author was judged to be a valid experimental stimulus.

### Gender Difference

I chose George Clooney, who is often portrayed as a romantic symbol for heterosexual women, as the persona of the study. Therefore, it is necessary to detect whether or not there are any differences between male and female participants in terms of their PSR, PSI and PSB with George Clooney. I compared the means of PSR, PSI, and PSB by gender and found no significant differences in the three variables between male and female participants (See Table 2 for details).

Table 2  
Mean Comparisons of Pretest of PSR, Posttest of PSR, PSB, and PSI by Gender

Variable	Male	Female		<i>p</i>
Pretest of PSR	2.29	2.31	$F(1, 187) = .03$	.88
Posttest of PSR	2.19	2.15	$F(1, 187) = .16$	.68
PSB	2.67	2.78	$F(1, 188) = 1.65$	.20
PSI	2.90	2.94	$F(1, 188) = .16$	.69

Note. PSR = parasocial relationship; PSI = parasocial interaction; PSB = parasocial breakup.

### Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis predicted that PSR would be positively related to PSI. A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted between pretest PSR and PSI and posttest PSR and PSI by conditions, respectively. In all conditions but Condition 2 (no scandal and movie), not only the pretest PSR but also the posttest PSR were positively related to PSI. This result suggests that whether or not the scandal was introduced prior to a talk show, the stronger the PSR, the stronger the PSI. When the scandal was introduced before the movie, PSR was positively related to PSI. Therefore, this hypothesis was supported for Conditions 1, 3, and 4. See Table 3 for the details of the correlations.

### Hypothesis 2

To test the second hypothesis that predicted a negative effect of the scandal on PSR, a one-way ANOVA was conducted, with the news story (scandal vs. no scandal) as the independent variable, and the posttest of PSR as the dependent variable. The posttest of PSR of the scandal news groups (Conditions 1 and 3,  $M = 2.04$ ,  $SD = .48$ ) was significantly lower than that of the no scandal news groups (Conditions 2 and 4,  $M = 2.29$ ,  $SD = .44$ ),  $F(1, 188) = 13.77$ ,  $p < .001$ . Another one-way ANOVA was conducted with the pretest of PSR as the dependent variable to check the validity of random assignment. The pretest of PSR of the scandal news groups (Conditions 1 and 3,  $M = 2.30$ ,  $SD = .45$ ) was not significantly different from that of the no scandal news groups (Conditions 2 and 4,  $M = 2.31$ ,  $SD = .41$ ),  $F(1, 188) = .02$ ,  $p = .90$ . Therefore, this hypothesis was supported as well.

### Hypothesis 3

The third hypothesis predicted that PSR would be positively related to PSB. A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted between the pretest of PSR (before they read the scandal news) and the PSB of those participants who read the scandal news in Condition 1 and 3. The pretest of PSR was positively related to PSB,  $r = .45$ ,  $p < .001$ , suggesting that those with stronger PSR experienced more PSB when reading about the scandal in which the actor was involved. Therefore, hypothesis 3 was also supported. This result is consistent with the findings of previous research on PSB.

### Hypothesis 4 and Research Question

To examine the fourth hypothesis about the scandal's influence on PSI and the research question about the effect of program type on PSI, a two-way ANOVA was conducted, with the news story (scandal vs. no scandal) and program type (movie vs. talk show) as independent variables and PSI as the dependent variable. There was no News Story  $\times$  Program Type interaction effect,  $F(1, 194) = .01$ ,  $p = .94$ .

There was also no main effect of the scandal. The PSI between the scandal groups and no scandal groups was not significantly different from each other,  $F(1, 194) = 3.36$ ,  $p = .06$ . Therefore,  $H_4$  was not supported.

There was a significant main effect of program type on PSI,  $F(1, 194) = 38.69$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Table 3  
Correlations Between PSR and PSI by Conditions

	PSR	PSI
Condition 1 (scandal and movie)		
Pretest of PSR		.49***
Posttest of PSR		.45***
Condition 2 (no scandal and movie)		
Pretest of PSR		.16
Posttest of PSR		.08
Condition 3 (scandal and talk show)		
Pretest of PSR		.46***
Posttest of PSR		.50***
Condition 4 (no scandal and talk show)		
Pretest of PSR		.57***
Posttest of PSR		.63***

Note. PSR = parasocial relationship; PSI = parasocial interaction.

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .



In both scandal and no scandal conditions, the PSI with the attorney portrayed by George Clooney in the movie were significantly higher than the PSI with George Clooney as a guest in the talk show. In the scandal conditions, the PSI of the movie group ( $M = 3.10$ ,  $SD = .61$ ) was higher than that of the talk show group ( $M = 2.62$ ,  $SD = .52$ ). In the no scandal conditions, the PSI of the movie group ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = .47$ ) was also higher than that of the talk show group ( $M = 2.76$ ,  $SD = .54$ ).

### Discussion

The present study contributes to PSI literature in the following aspects. First, it differentiates between PSI and PSR and reveals their connections. Second, it fills the gap of inadequate research on voluntary termination of PSR by examining the effects of an actor's scandal on audience members' PSR, PSB, and PSI with him. Third, it discovers the influence of program type on audience members' PSI with an actor and a character he plays in the programs. In this study, PSI was positively related to PSR in three of the four conditions (the exception was the no scandal and movie condition). A scandal with respect to an actor influenced the participants' PSR with him negatively. Audience members with stronger PSR experienced a higher level of PSB when they learned of a scandal involving the actor. PSI with a character played by an actor in a movie was significantly higher than PSI with the actor as a guest in a talk show.

It is intriguing that PSR and PSI were unrelated in the no scandal and movie condition, while they were positively related in the other three conditions. This may be due to the difference between PSI with a media figure (talk show) and PSI with a character played by the media figure (movie). In Giles's (2002) authenticity dimension, a talk show guest and a movie character belong to the first and the second order of personae, respectively. Schiappa, Allen, and Gregg (2007) pointed out that PSR formed with talk show hosts or guests is different from PSR formed with fictional characters in dramas or comedies. The fictional characters do not exist outside the particular programs (or fictional venues), but the performers who play the characters do. In the talk show, George Clooney is still himself, although the show re-

quires staging and performing to some extent. Therefore, the audiences' PSR target is the same as their PSI target in the talk show. In contrast, in the movie, the actor plays a fictional character (the target of PSI), who is totally different from the actor himself (the target of PSR).

With respect to the scandal and movie watching condition, reading the news of the scandal may have been the reason for the positive relationship between PSR and PSI. When the audiences in the condition saw the attorney character in the movie after they read the scandal news, the image of "actor Clooney" in the scandal news they had read might be activated in their minds and thus they kept viewing the attorney character as the actor Clooney. By contrast, in the eyes of those movie watchers who had not read the scandal news, the shadow of Clooney as an actor on that attorney character might be lighter. In other words, the targets of PSR and PSI were better matched in the scandal and movie condition than in the no scandal and movie condition.

The distinction between PSI with first-order personae and second-order personae is reflected in the finding of the research question as well. Although the same actor appeared in both programs, audiences' PSI with the attorney in the movie was significantly higher than their PSI with the guest in the talk show. This may be due to the difference between the character's and the actor's obtrusiveness in the programs. In the movie clip used in this study, the attorney played by Clooney was the protagonist. He spoke the majority of the lines and the main plots centered on him. Although there was another character played by Zeta-Jones, there were not many plots about her in the clip. While in the talk show, the amount of time that Clooney and Letterman spent talking was approximately the same, and therefore, when the audiences were watching the show, they focused on both people. Letterman's words, jokes, and performance may have "competed with" or even "diluted" the audiences' PSI with Clooney. Obtrusiveness has been found to be positively related to PSI (Schramm & Wirth, 2010). George Clooney as the guest in the talk show was not as obtrusive as was his character in the movie, so the audiences' PSI in the talk show conditions was not as strong as PSI in the movie conditions.

Further, movies and talk shows are different in structure. Movies plots are designed to build upon each other. If audiences miss a certain plot, they may have difficulty understanding the subsequent ones. Therefore, movie audiences need to be attentive enough during viewing to comprehend the movie plots. In comparison, talk show structure is more casual and improvised so audiences may be more relaxed during viewing. Movies' narrative structure is designed to allow audiences to become "immersed" in the movies, while a talk show's elements such as its stage, lights, impromptu music played by the show's band, special sound effects, and frequent applause and laughter keep reminding TV audiences that they are just spectators. Even though they can "get into" the talk show at certain moments, the above-mentioned elements may interrupt such engagement and pull them back to reality. Therefore, the movie clip may be stronger than the talk show in its "transportation" effect. Higher transportation is associated with greater PSI (Green & Brock, 2000; Greenwood, 2008), so it is not surprising to find that the audience members in the movie conditions were higher in PSI than their peers in the talk show conditions.

Most PSI studies focus on TV, but other media, such as movie, receive much less attention. Different media indicate not only different types of personae (e.g., real vs. fictional) but also different program structures (such as transportation potential) and different media use contexts (Giles, 2002; Schramm & Wirth, 2010). For example, TV programs are often broadcast in the form of series (e.g., talk shows, sitcoms, soap operas, etc.). Therefore, if audiences follow a certain sitcom or a soap opera, their PSI with the characters in a certain episode is built upon their prior PSI with the characters in previous episodes. This type of TV PSI is analogous to meeting with a friend. In contrast, when audiences watch a movie (except one in the movie series such as *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings*), their PSI with a character in the movie is similar to meeting with a stranger. In addition, TV programs are often interrupted by commercials. The commercials continuously "pull" the audiences back to their real world from the TV world. In comparison, movie viewing without the interruption of commercials is a more continual process. Furthermore, movie viewing and TV watching contexts are differ-

ent. People usually watch TV at home, which is a private space (although people sometimes watch TV in public places, such as bars). They are either alone or with close relations (e.g., family, significant other, and close friends), and it is common for them to converse with their covievers regarding the TV programs' plots and characters during viewing. However, movie theaters are public places and movie viewers are surrounded by strangers. People are unlikely to engage in much conversation with their family and friends even though they sit next to each other. Therefore, when researchers investigate PSI across different media, they should take into account not only personae attributes but also media characteristics and viewing contexts.

This study also demonstrated that a scandal has a negative influence on PSR and PSR is positively related to PSB. These results are similar to what researchers have found on how negative events (e.g., deception, betrayal, etc.) influence personal relationships. They are also consistent with the findings of previous PSR development and dissolution studies showing that people respond to media figures in the same way they react to their real life social relationships. Perhaps these study results provide general support for Piccirillo's (1986) argument that mediated experience is real experience. Piccirillo (1986) contended that people build intimacy with TV characters because of TV's frequent and regular injection into their daily life. TV as a medium brings characters into people's homes, but its content and aesthetic nature "rhetorically molds those characters into the shape and substance of living experience" (p. 345).

### Limitations of the Present Study

A few limitations of this study need to be addressed. First, only one scandal news story was used, and the scandal was a serious one (physical violence that led to an arrest). In real life, the severity of scandals involving public figures can vary from such small incidents as spitting in public to such serious ones as murder accusations. E. Cohen (2010) found that respondents anticipated greater reduction in closeness with respect to major moral scandals (e.g., using cocaine) than they did toward minor moral scandals (e.g., shoplifting). It is worth examining whether scandals having different levels of severity can influence people's PSR and PSB

differently. PSB studies (including this one) so far have consistently reported “love more, hurt more” findings, perhaps because the events used in these studies are all major ones, such as termination of shows, deaths of public figures, and physical violence. However, “love more, forgive more” may be another possibility. The social psychology literature regarding people’s reactions toward betrayal in close relationship has shown that commitment facilitates forgiveness of betrayal. This effect is mediated by people’s cognitive interpretation of betrayal behavior, such as thinking about whether “my partner upset me on purpose” (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002, p. 967). Therefore, investigating and comparing the influences of major and minor scandals on PSR and PSB may be a direction for future research.

Second, although scandal news influenced PSR negatively, this effect did not “carry over” to PSI. This may be due to the length of the movie clip and the talk show used in this study. Before PSI was measured, the audiences had already spent 30 min watching the movie clip or the talk show. This amount of time may have been sufficient for the audiences to become largely transported into the programs. Researchers have reported that “loss of self” is a key feature of transportation, and the “self” that is “lost” in the transportation process consists primarily of negative influences, such as personal concerns, problems, and worries (Green, 2004; Green & Brock, 2000). Therefore, it is reasonable to speculate that audiences’ transportation into the programs might counteract the influence of the scandal news they had read. What could have been done in this study was to measure PSI multiple times at different moments during the programs to see if the effect of the scandal news changed over time. Perhaps in the first 10 min, the influence is strong, but as the audiences become transported further into the programs, the scandal’s effect declines. Furthermore, this result may also be due to the comedic tone of both programs. Both the movie and the talk show were full of amusing plots and jokes and thus were quite entertaining to watch. The audiences thus entertained were probably still in a good mood when they responded to the PSI questions immediately after watching the programs. Therefore, the comedic tone may undermine the influence of the scandal news. Future research should use “neutral” or even “negative” tone

programs to see whether a scandal influences audiences’ PSI more. Moreover, only a movie and a talk show were compared in this study, while other types of programs, such as reality shows, soap operas, and sitcoms should be explored in the future.

Third, in most PSI/PSR studies, the participants have reported their PSI/PSR with either a media figure of their choosing (e.g., favorite TV newscaster) or one of the media figures in the shows that the researcher asked them to watch. In contrast, here the participants were asked to report their PSR, PSI and PSB with only one media figure assigned by the researcher. Asking all the participants to report their PSR, PSI and PSB with only one specific media figure reduces the power of the study design. However, it would be challenging to capture the influence of a scandal on people’s PSR and PSI with a media figure of their choosing. It is unpredictable when scandals will happen to the media figures that people choose, so it is difficult to compare people’s PSR with them before and after the scandals. It is also difficult to concoct scandal news stories about the media figures that people choose because they are probably very familiar with them. People may be well aware of the most recent news about those figures so they may not believe a scandal news story written by researchers.

Fourth, the average pretest PSR scores in the four conditions are relatively low. First, as mentioned above, George Clooney was the persona assigned by the researchers, so the participants’ PSR with him might not be as strong as their PSR with the personae of their choosing. Second, there was no major news (either positive or negative) about George Clooney when this study was conducted, so the participants might not have experienced strong PSR at the time of the study. Therefore, it is unknown whether being a fan of the actor played a role in these results.

Fifth, the participants watched the movie clip and the talk show in a classroom, which is different from a living room or a theater where people usually watch TV programs and movies. People’s interaction behavior is influenced by the context of communication, so the participants’ PSI in the classroom might be different from their PSI in more natural settings. Furthermore, the participants in all groups used the same classroom, so the above-mentioned con-

text difference between movie watching and TV viewing was absent. These may constitute a threat to this study's external validity.

### Future Direction

Many celebrities, politicians, and athletes nowadays use social networking sites (SNSs) to keep in touch with their fans. Therefore, these sites constitute another channel for their fans to parasocially interact with them. The content in public figures' SNS pages is very appealing to their followers for several reasons. First, it can include a variety of most recent information about the figures, such as their work, their personal life, their interaction with other public figures, and their likes and dislikes. Second, the information on public figures' SNS pages can be presented in a variety of forms, such as text, pictures, sound, and videos, so people's PSI in SNSs involve reading, listening, and viewing. Third, the SNS pages are (or at least they seem to be) managed by the public figures themselves and much of the information may not be revealed in other traditional media outlets. Therefore, PSI through SNSs can create a stronger sense of intimacy. Fourth, fans not only read the messages left by the public figures, but also reply to them, forward them to their friends, and discuss them with other followers on SNSs. Therefore, the fans are not only recipients, but also interactants. Although a few studies have addressed some of the above-mentioned aspects (Baek et al., 2013; Huang, 2013; Lee & Jang, 2013; Powell, Richmond, & Williams, 2011; Stever & Lawson, 2013), more research on PSI in SNSs need be conducted, especially the conceptualization and operationalization of this new form of PSI.

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