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"My Superpower is Being Honest:" Perceived Credibility and Parasocial Relationships with Alex Jones

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This study explored perceptions of *Infowars* host Alex Jones' credibility, and functions of audience parasocial relationships (PSRs) using a sample of Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) workers (N = 584). Several PSR functions predicted perceived credibility of Alex Jones and viewing of *Infowars*. The conflict and self-understanding functions predicted perceived credibility while relationship maintenance, catharsis, and compensation predicted viewing *Infowars*. Demographic factors had no significant effect on perceived credibility, although education level was a negative predictor of viewing.

Keywords: Parasocial relationships, parasocial interaction, PSR, PSI, news credibility, fake news, Alex Jones, Infowars, quantitative, uses and gratifications, Mturk

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> "The information war is real and we're losing it" (Starbird, 2017; Westneat, 2017). With the 2016 election, many Americans became conscious of "fake news," news coverage of "fake news," diffusion of "fake news" through social media, media coverage of "fake news" in social media, and social media coverage of media coverage of "fake news" in social media. The tales once seen only in supermarket tabloids or *The Onion* were becoming viral, and in many cases were more frequently shared by social media users than news articles from established news sources (Holan, 2016).

What is "fake news?" Holan (2016) sums it up well: "Fake news is made-up stuff, masterfully manipulated to look like credible journalistic reports that are easily spread online to large audiences willing to believe the fictions and spread the word" (Paragraph 2). Renowned journalist Glenn

Greenwald identifies "fake news" as an umbrella term, lamenting: "It's almost, at this point, something that gets applied to any type of journalism that I dislike. Or even any journalism that's misleading or false" (Carless, 19-Dec., 2016, Paragraph 41).

Readers must also discern between "fake news" and content that has traditionally been called "propaganda." According to *Fake news, lies, and propaganda* (2018), **"**fake news" refers to "those news stories that are false: the story itself is fabricated**,** with no verifiable facts, sources or quotes" (Paragraph 1) and often used as a vehicle for advertising sales. Propaganda may be more strategic than "fake news" in terms of desired political effects (*Issue Brief,* 2017).

The show *Infowars* is a widely identified source of false information (e.g., Westneat, 2017) although *Infowars* host Alex Jones has told viewers that his "… superpower is being honest." Jones has (colorfully) argued that NASA is shipping the alleged 2000 children who go missing in the US every day to sex colonies on Mars:

> … following the missing children broadcast, NASA rebuked the report that children were being sent to sex colonies on Mars. That NASA, an independent agency under the executive branch, felt compelled to respond at all gives weight to the number of potential believers and the influence that Jones and his like may wield (Wooley, 2017, Paragraph 7).

Although sensational Martian sex colony stories may be vile and mostly harmless, Jones' believers, much like those who previously stockpiled food and weapons against Martians after the legendary *War of the Worlds* broadcast, may not always be so. North Carolina resident Edgar Maddison Welch, after hearing the story of a pedophile ring in a Washington D.C. pizza restaurant from an *Infowars* video, decided to investigate child sex slavery at the Comet Pong, in an event later dubbed and hashtagged "#pizzagate." Welch walked into the restaurant with an AR-15, a .38 special, and a 12-gauge shotgun and began firing. Although none of the patrons were injured, the incident terrified the victims and made national news, which later led Jones to recant the story (Yuhas, 2017).

This was not the first time a citizen used Jones' reporting as rationale for violence. In 2011 after viewing an Alex Jones movie called *Loose Change* and other broadcasts, a mentally ill man killed six people in a supermarket, severely injuring Arizona Representative Gabrielle Giffords (*America's Lethal Politics*, 2017; Zaitchick, 2011). One might argue there will always be gullible people who try to act upon false information, and this may be true. "Pizzagate," attempted assassinations of public officials, drinking water allegedly transforming frogs into homosexuals, and child sex colonies on Mars, however, are far from the end of the Jones story. Alex Jones is growing in clout and had an estimated 5.9 million YouTube viewers (*Last Week Tonight*, 2017) before being removed from YouTube in August 2018, only to generate over 15 million views by appearing on the *Joe Rogan Experience* podcast in February and March of 2019. A third appearance on the *Joe Rogan Experience* in October 2020 generated another 15 million views by mid-December.

In fact, Woolsey (2017) and Jones himself have revealed that *Infowars* "has the backing of President Donald Trump, who argues that Jones has an amazing reputation and deserves a Pulitzer" for his reporting (Paragraph 4). For some Americans, Trump's kind words for Jones may have lent *Infowars* even greater credibility.

The present study explores the functions of parasocial relationships (PSRs) regarding perceived credibility or a mediated persona. Why is this an important topic to investigate? First, scholarly research of PSRs has potential to "provide significant insight into the audience-media relationship" (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000, p. 79). Second, PSRs are a determinant of the types of content people choose to view (Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006). Finally, PSRs with conspiracy theorists such as Alex Jones or other alternative media figures can be points of entry into audience minds through which propaganda, misinformation, disinformation, and fake news may flow. While several studies have explored PSRs and credibility, this study is the first to explore perceived credibility and viewing in relation to the specific functions of PSRs previously identified in the literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

News Credibility

O'Keefe (1990) defined credibility as ''judgments made by a perceiver concerning the believability of a communicator'' (p. 131). News credibility studies have often focused on the integrity of news and political information (e.g., Johnson & Kaye, 2010). Assessment of online news credibility is complex and multidimensional, and is influenced by content, links to sites or news articles, and any number of other characteristics (Chung, Nam, & Stefanone, 2012). While such characteristics may affect audience perceptions of the credibility of online information, the larger purpose of the present study is to explore *intra*personal communication that occurs in relation to PSRs with Alex Jones. Such intrapersonal communication may be inspired by a variety of facets and contribute to the one-sided "para-social relationships" originally identified by Horton & Wohl (1956). Perceived credibility of *Infowars* as a news source, we argue, plays a role in PSRs with Alex Jones and may manifest itself in people's actual PSR functions.

Parasocial Relationships (PSRs)

PSRs are one-sided relationships people have with mediated "personae" (Horton & Wohl, 1956). PSRs often begin through parasocial interaction (PSI) with a performer (Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen, 2016; Hartmann & Schramm, 2008) such as an actor, character, political candidate, or athlete, and may subsequently evolve into one-sided relationships through imagined interactions, or IIs (Madison & Porter, 2015; 2016; Madison, Porter, & Greule, 2016). While a PSR may form after experiencing a PSI, a PSI is not necessary for forming a PSR; a PSR may also form after simply becoming "acquainted" with a mediated figure through exposure. Perse and Rubin (1989) found that after exposure to media content, people engage in various mental activities that lead to behavioral changes. IIs are one such mental activity and are a largely functional type of daydreaming that allow us to build cognitive scripts for anticipated future interactions (Honeycutt, 2010).

People who watch television normally experience some degree of PSI (Perse & Rubin, 1989); an expanding body of experimental (e.g. Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005), survey (e.g. Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985) and qualitative research (e.g. Caughey, 1984) has examined the various outcomes (as well as their determinants) of the interactions audiences have with mediated personae. One possible outcome of PSI is lingering PSRs, which carry on through the relationship maintenance function of IIs. The relationship maintenance function of II is associated with relational uncertainty (Van Kelegom & Wright, 2013), and allows people to maintain relationships through imagined interaction in lieu of face-

to-face contact (Honeycutt & McCann, 2017). PSRs share many of the cognitive aspects of real-life relationships, but lack certain behavioral components and intensity (Cohen, 2003). PSRs also exist beyond the viewing experience, as people's thoughts often wander to mediated personae they have seen online or on TV.

While people from many cultures around the world may have gods, goddesses, angels, or other mythical creatures involved in their IIs, the Western world tends to have IIs with people seen on television (Caughey, 1984) or online. Continuing II work with mediated personae after exposure to that personae is what, Madison and Porter (2015, 2016) argue, constitutes a PSR. A PSR lasts beyond the PSI taking place during media exposure to a persona (e.g. Cummins & Cui, 2014; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006) and may become a part of a person's life, influencing his/her thinking, feeling, and behavior.

Functions of Parasocial Relationships

Much like IIs, PSRs can be assessed in terms of their functions and characteristics (see Honeycutt, 2010). The functions of PSR include relationship maintenance, conflict linkage, self-understanding, compensation, and rehearsal (Madison & Porter, 2015). Individuals maintain connections to mediated personae through imaginative *relationship maintenance*. Often imaginative work has a degree of *conflict linkage* within people's lives and involves other personae with whom they have PSRs. The conflict function of IIs involves ruminating about negative affect (Honeycutt, 2003). Some parasocial literature denies that PSRs compensate for real-life human-to-human contact (e.g. Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985; Madison & Porter, 2015) which may be explained by the lack the emotional connections in PSR that are characteristic of real-life relationships (Cohen, 2003). On the other hand, the II literature suggests that *compensation* is indeed one of the major functions of II, for example, among geographically-separated couples (e.g. Allen, 1994), although it is the least frequently reported (Honeycutt, Vickery, & Hatcher, 2015). Under certain circumstances, however, PSR may compensate for personal relationships among people whose PSRs are characterized as retroactive, include a good deal of variety, and are used for rehearsal for real-life scenarios (Madison, Porter, & Greule, 2016). There is also a practical aspect to the compensation function of PSR; most people never meet celebrities with whom they have PSRs, and a PSR is as close as they will get to them.

Although Chandler (2004) argued that catharsis can typically only occur under circumstances more intense than television viewing, suggesting that *catharsis* is better measured psycho-physiologically, the concept has been observed as a function of both IIs (e.g. Honeycutt, 2010) and PSRs (Madison & Porter, 2015). It is one of the most frequently reported functions of II (Honeycutt, Vickery, & Hatcher, 2015). Madison and Porter (2015) found that cathartic experiences with PSRs was a strong discriminating variable between people reporting low levels of PSI and those reporting high levels of PSI. This indicates catharsis may play a role in the formation of a PSR itself after a PSI sequence.

Much like IIs, PSRs function as a means of *self-understanding*. Imagining interacting with personae whom a person has seen on television or online helps people to assemble their thoughts, clarify viewpoints, and better understand their own perspectives. A study by Savage and Spence (2014) suggested many viewers seek to have their opinions confirmed by radio hosts while others may seek opposing viewpoints for the purpose of picking apart arguments. With this in mind, mediated personae provide imaginary conversation partners whom people may use to develop scripts for later real-life

interactions with others. In Madison and Porter's (2015) study, people who reported higher levels of PSI also reported higher levels of self-understanding, catharsis, and relationship maintenance in their PSRs.

In light of the available information on the functions of IIs and PSRs, we offer the following research questions and hypotheses for testing:

RQ1: Which functions of PSRs with Alex Jones predict perceived credibility?

RQ2: Which functions of PSRs predict *Infowars* viewing?

H1a-c: The relationship maintenance (a), catharsis (b), and self-understanding (c) functions of PSRs with Alex Jones will predict heavier *Infowars* viewing habits.

METHODS

Participants

After receiving IRB approval from a prominent southern university in the US, researchers collected the sample through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) using an online survey programmed into Google Form. Participants were required to read a consent form, which stipulated they be 18 years of age or older to participate before continuing with the survey. Each participant was awarded a 5-cent Amazon credit for completing the survey and entering a code back into MTurk. Participants were free to drop out of the study with neither penalty to them nor the researchers. Furthermore, and possibly ironically, participants were required to recognize an image of Alex Jones and fulfill the qualification that "MTurk workers must speak, read, listen to, and write fluent English" before beginning the survey.

Among respondents (N = 584), slightly more men (n = 294) than women (n = 287) participated (50.3% vs. 49.2%). Almost 40% of the sample (n = 231) reported earning $30,000 or less in household income per year; 15% reported earning $30,000 to $45,000 per year ($n$ = 87), 16% reported earning $45,000 to $60,000 per year ($n$ = 92), 11% reported earning $60,000-$75,000 per year (n = 64), 8% reported earning $75,000 to $90,000 per year ($n$ = 48), and 11% reported earning more than $90,000 per year ($n$ = 62).

Although diverse, participants largely reported being white (n = 354; 61%), followed by 21% reporting Asian (n = 124), followed by 7% reporting Hispanic (n = 42) followed by 5% Black (n =27), 3% mixed (n = 18), 1% American Indian/Alaska Native (n = 7), and 2% Other (n = 12). Respondents were also well-educated; 3% (n = 15) had terminal degrees, 18% had a master's degree or other advanced certification (n = 103), 41% had bachelor's degrees (n = 241), 28% had some college (n = 166), 8% had high school diplomas (n = 49), and about 2% had only elementary or middle school educations (n = 10). Finally, the average respondent was 34.6 years old (SD = 11.14).

Procedure

Researchers created a survey in Google Form to measure viewership of Alex Jones' show *Infowars*, perceptions of Jones' credibility, PSRs with Jones, and basic demographics. Links to the survey were distributed through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Data were then exported from Google Form into a CSV file and loaded into SPSS for analysis. Respondents were asked a series of questions that assessed perceived credibility of Alex Jones, parasocial functions and attributes, frequency of *Infowars* viewing, and demographics.

Measures

First, respondents were asked how frequently they watched Alex Jones/*Infowars.* Possible responses included "never," "a few times per year," "a few times per month," "weekly," and "daily."

This allowed for identification of the heavier viewers, as well as those who may have had a passing familiarity with the man and the show but indicated they did not watch *Infowars.*

To assess perceptions of Alex Jones' credibility, Meyer's (1988) Newspaper Credibility Index as derived from Gaziano and McGrath's (1986) News Credibility Scale was used and contextualized for *Infowars*. Questions asked participants to "tell us how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about Alex Jones and *Infowars*" on a 7-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating "Strongly Disagree," 2 indicating "Disagree," 3 indicating "Slightly Disagree," 4 indicating "Neither Agree nor Disagree," 5 indicating "Slightly Agree," 6 indicating "Agree," and 7 indicating "Strongly Agree." Items included "Alex Jones/*Infowars* is inaccurate" and "Alex Jones/*Infowars* is biased." During data analysis, answers were reverse-coded so that higher scores would reflect greater perceptions of credibility.

PSR functions were measured using abbreviated versions of Madison and Porter's (2015, 2016) PSR functions scales contextualized for PSRs with Alex Jones. These measures, unlike many measures of PSI (e.g., Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985; Auter & Palmgreen, 1992), tap into the everyday functions of people's relationships with mediated personae. For the study at hand, each of the function measures were comprised of the top-two loading items from Madison and Porter's (2015, 2016) factor analyses of PSR scales. Responses were measured on 5-point scales from Never (0), Rarely (1), Sometimes (2), Often (3), and All the Time (4). An example of one of the items measuring relationship maintenance included "I imagine interacting with Alex Jones to maintain a bond with him;" an example of an item measuring the conflict function included "I think about Alex Jones in conflict with others."

Finally, respondents were asked for typical demographic information which included age, household income, ethnicity, education level, and gender. Age was measured using a dropdown menu from which respondents selected their "age they turned on their last birthday." Household income was measured on a seven-point scale beginning with "$0-$15,000 per year" and moving up in $15,000 increments to "90,000+ per year." Ethnicity was measured using standard ethnic categories ("White," "African American," "Asian," etc.). For analysis, race was recoded into a dummy variable indicating "white" or not. Education level was measured using a 7-point scale ranging from "Elementary School Grades K-5" up to "Terminal degree (Ph.D., Ed.D., CFRE, MFA, etc." and gender was measured as Male/Female and coded as a dummy variable for the analysis. See Table 1: *Scale Properties* for greater detail on the scales used in this study.

Table 1: Scale Properties

	#Items	N	M	*SD*	Alpha
PSR Functions					
Relationship Maint.	2	584	0.65	1.05	.94
Conflict	2	584	0.99	1.14	.82
Self-Understanding	2	584	0.74	1.05	.92
Catharsis `	2	584	0.65	1.03	.90
Compensation	2	584	1.05	1.15	.75
Credibility	7	584	2.57	1.09	.96

RESULTS

RQ1 asked, "Which functions of PSRs with Alex Jones predict perceived credibility?" Hierarchical regression revealed the self-understanding function (β = .21, $p < .05$) significantly predicted perceived credibility while the conflict function of PSR (β = -0.27, $p < .01$) negatively predicted perceived credibility; $F(5, 580) = 13.93$, $R^2 = .11$, $p < .05$. The significant effects of both the conflict (β = -0.24, $p < .01$) and self-understanding functions (β = 0.20, $p < .05$) remained after creating a second model that controlled for the possible effects of demographic $F(10, 580) = 7.86$, $R^2 = .12$, $p < .01$. None of the demographic variables had significant effects on perception of credibility. See *Table 2: Linear Regression of Functions on Perceived Credibility*.

Table 2: Linear Regression of PSR Functions on Perceived Credibility

	+Model 1				
	B	SE(B)	β	*t*	Sig.(*p*)
Functions					
Relationship Maint.	0.17	0.11	0.16	1.56	.12
Conflict	-0.26	0.06	-0.27	-4.46	.00
Self-Understanding	0.22	0.10	0.21	2.13	.03
Catharsis `	0.08	0.10	0.07	0.73	.47
Compensation	0.07	0.06	0.07	1.18	.24
	++Model 2				
	B	SE(B)	β	*t*	Sig.(*p*)
Functions					
Relationship Maint.	0.16	0.11	0.16	1.53	.13
Conflict	-0.24	0.06	-.25	-3.97	.00
Self-Understanding	0.21	0.10	0.22	2.02	.04
Catharsis `	0.06	0.11	0.05	0.52	.60
Compensation	0.06	0.06	0.07	1.15	.25
Demographics					
Race/Ethnicity (White/Not)	-0.18	0.09	0.06	-1.76	.08
Income	-0.01	0.02	-0.03	-0.42	.68
Gender	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.62	.30
Age	0.01	0.00	0.06	1.38	.17
Education	-0.07	0.04	-0.05	-1.61	.11

+R^2 = .11; ++R^2 = .12; +++*F*-change = 6.07

RQ2 asked, "Which functions of PSR predict *Infowars* viewing?" To answer this question, the following hypotheses stated that (H1a-c): relationship maintenance (a), catharsis (b), and self-understanding (C) functions of PSRs with Alex Jones will predict heavier *Infowars* viewing habits. Hierarchical regression revealed the relationship maintenance function (β = .35, $p < .01$) as a positive predictor of viewing, offering support for H1a. The catharsis function (β = -.24, $p < .01$) emerged as a

significant negative predictor of viewing, lending additional support for H1b. The self-understanding function's (β = .17, p = .07) predictive power emerged as a marginally significant factor, offering very limited support for H1c; $F(5, 580) = 33.65$, $R^2 = .23$, $p < .01$.

Table 3: Linear Regression of PSR Functions on Infowars Viewing

	+Model 1				
	B	SE(B)	β	*t*	Sig.(*p*)
Functions					
Relationship Maint.	0.34	0.09	0.36	3.78	.00
Conflict	0.10	0.05	0.11	1.90	.05
Self-Understanding	0.16	0.09	0.17	1.81	.07
Catharsis `	-0.24	0.09	-0.42	-2.68	.01
Compensation	0.11	0.05	0.13	2.34	.02
	++Model 2				
	B	SE(B)	β	*t*	Sig.(*p*)
Functions					
Relationship Maint.	0.35	0.09	0.35	3.74	.00
Conflict	0.09	0.05	0.10	1.68	.09
Self-Understanding	0.17	0.09	0.18	1.95	.05
Catharsis `	-0.24	0.09	-0.24	-2.64	.01
Compensation	0.09	0.05	0.10	1.92	.05
Demographics					
Race/Ethnicity (White/Not)	-0.04	0.09	-0.02	-0.47	.64
Income	-0.01	0.02	-0.01	-0.35	.73
Gender	-0.20	0.07	-0.10	-2.64	.01
Age	0.00	0.00	0.05	1.26	.21
Education	-0.09	0.04	-0.09	-2.40	.02

+R^2 = .23; ++R^2 = .25; +++F-change = 6.27

The race variable was then separated into a dummy variable, based on races reported by respondents, to describe "White" or "Not White." After controlling for demographic factors in the second model, the relationship maintenance PSR function remained a strong predictor (β = .34, p < .01) while catharsis (β = -.25, p = .01) remained a strong negative predictor of *Infowars* viewing. When demographics were included in the model, the self-understanding function also emerged as a significant predictor of *Infowars* viewing (β = .18, p = .05); $F(10, 580) = 18.56$, $R^2 = .25$; $p < .01$. Therefore, based on the analysis, the data supported H1a-c. The imaginative functions of relationship maintenance with Alex Jones and self-understanding positively predicted frequency of viewing while the catharsis function was a negative predictor (heavier viewing was less cathartic).

The conflict and compensation functions that have been identified in the II/PSR literature and were included in this model as others have done in the past when exploring functions of PSR and II (e.g.; Honeycutt, 2010; Madison & Porter, 2015). The conflict function (β = .11, p = .05) and the compensation (β = .13, p < .05) functions emerged as significant predictors of viewing. After controlling for demographics, the compensation function (β = .12, p < .05) remained a significant predictor of viewing while the conflict function became a marginally significant predictor (β = .10, p = .09)

Two demographic predictors emerged when all demographics were added to the model. Being male (β = .09, p < .05) predicted viewing while education (β = -0.08, p < .05) was a significant negative predictor of viewing in the second model. See *Table 3: Linear Regression of PSR Functions on* Infowars *Viewing*. Based on these findings, the following discussion explores the functions of PSRs with Alex Jones as they pertain to perceived credibility and viewing of *Infowars* while addressing demographic influences revealed in the analysis.

DISCUSSION

PSR Functions as Predictors of Credibility

The present study found that the conflict function of PSRs was a negative predictor of credibility. The more people imagine interpersonal conflict with Jones the less credible they tend to find information broadcast through *Infowars.* Conflict-linkage theory, as advanced by Honeycutt (2010) suggests that a sense of injustice fosters rumination in IIs; theories of affective disposition also suggest audiences desire to see justice served (Raney, 2006). Despite *Infowars* providing a dominant theme of pervasive and conspiratorial injustice in the world, *Infowars* viewers may not find feelings of justice through watching the show. As such, conflict-driven PSRs with Alex Jones may never result in satisfaction, therefore damaging his credibility as a source of credible information in the minds of its audiences. People arguably watch *Infowars* for the dramatic and aggressive conflict rather than for solutions to the problems presented. Such a motive may also allow some viewers to create their own (occasionally lethal) solutions to Jones' often-bizarre claims.

On the other hand, adolescents and young adults are notorious for having uncrystallized ideologies and opinions on complex ideas such as governance, social engineering, and other challenging issues that liberal democracies face (Mook, 1983; Sears, 1986; Meltzer, Naab, & Daschmann, 2012). In a mediated information ecosystem filled with fake news and conspiracy theories living alongside traditional and even strong journalism, does such a lack of crystallization extend beyond adolescence (perhaps into and beyond one's 30s, as indicated by the average age of the sample)?

Data suggest the self-understanding function of PSRs with Alex Jones predicts a sense of perceived credibility of Alex Jones and the show *Infowars*. As individuals imagine interacting with Alex Jones in PSRs, they come to better understand their own ideas and opinions. Among some viewers, this may lead to a sense of polarization between themselves and Alex Jones' ideology while among others it may serve to reinforce existing belief systems about the world. The data and analysis suggest the latter; the self-understanding function of PSRs with Alex Jones points toward greater perceived credibility of *Infowars* as a source of information.

With the conflict function of PSR negatively predicting credibility and self-understanding as a positive predictor of credibility, readers are left with one possible theoretical explanation. Selective exposure as a means of alleviating cognitive dissonance (see Festinger, 1957) offers insight into this

phenomenon. A variety of authors (e.g., Sunstein, 2009) claim that people use the Internet to find information that reinforces pre-existing beliefs which result in what Sunstein (2009) called the "daily me" syndrome. He worried that although people have more access to a greater amount of political information than at any time in history, people will still selectively expose themselves to information that conforms with their own political viewpoints. *Infowars* clearly provides viewers with loud and ready-made viewpoints that may help us to better understand those and our own viewpoints beyond the viewing experience, regardless of which existing ideas they reinforce, through PSRs.

PSR Functions as Predictors of Viewing

Which functions of PSR predicted viewing *Infowars*? First, conflict was a "noteworthy" (significant-but-marginal, when controlling for demographics) positive predictor of viewing. People who imagined more conflict in their PSRs associated with Alex Jones tended to spend more time viewing *Infowars*. As noted elsewhere, such PSRs may include an affective factor and may support reinforcement of existing ideas and beliefs, regardless of whether such ideas are in favor or opposition to the content of Jones' rhetoric. Imagining conflict may also be what Honeycutt, Vickery, and Hatcher (2015) describe as a "bouting behavior," in which people absorb themselves in ruminating about a conflict, such as an argument (or an energetic episode of *Infowars*). "Bouts" of imaginative work may occur around anniversaries, seasons, or certain topics of discussion (Honeycutt, Vickery, & Hatcher, 2015), which may also include *Infowars* content among people who have PSRs with Alex Jones.

Second, the relationship maintenance function of PSR predicted frequency of viewing and lends support to Madison and Porter's (2015) findings regarding relationship maintenance as a discriminating variable among groups of heavy and light viewers. Whether an audience member's gratification from watching *Infowars* is to have his/her buttons pushed or whether it is to find news that reinforces existing beliefs, people maintain PSRs with Alex Jones, and such imagined relational maintenance predicts frequency of viewing *Infowars*.

The self-understanding function of PSR was a marginal predictor of viewing, but became significant when gender and lack of education were added to the model. Because the data are correlational in nature, this finding could be explained in at least two different ways. One, it is possible that male, less-educated viewers use *Infowars* as a vehicle for understanding themselves -- to help crystallize opinions, whether those opinions run alongside or counter to those espoused by Alex Jones. On the other hand, and reflecting the correlational nature of the data, viewing *Infowars* could promote the self-understanding function of PSR, particularly among less-educated males, which is just as plausible. Future research should explore additional factors enhancing the relationship between viewing and the self-understanding function of PSRs.

Catharsis emerged as a significant negative predictor of viewing. This either suggests the more upset or uncomfortable people are by their Jones PSRs (indicating a lack of catharsis), the more they watch *Infowars*, or that the more people watch *Infowars* the more upset or uncomfortable their PSRs with Alex Jones become, which may not necessarily be an undesirable effect. As with the self-understanding function, a third or more outside factors may contribute to this relationship between the cathartic function of PSRs and viewing. What the data suggest is that viewers watch *Infowars* in association with a gratification of having "buttons pushed." Viewers may use *Infowars* as an object of "hatewatching."

Finally, the compensation function of PSR significantly predicted viewing even when controlling for demographics. This finding is intuitive; PSRs function as a substitute for actually interacting with Alex Jones which reflects the one-sided nature of PSRs initially identified by Horton and Wohl (1956). Most people will never meet Alex Jones in-person; therefore PSRs with Jones serve as a practical substitute for a face-to-face interpersonal relationship with him.

CONCLUSION

Conflict-oriented PSRs positively predict viewing but negatively predict credibility. *Infowars'* themes of conflict may attract viewers, however perceptions of Jones' credibility drops for the same PSR reason that attracts viewers to him in the first place. Self-understanding was a significant function of a PSR associated with both viewing and credibility and suggests that viewers receive gratifications of reinforcement of existing beliefs regardless the direction of their ideological alignment with the content. *Infowars* may confirm beliefs or, just as likely, confirm to non-believers that *Infowars* is not credible. Being male and less-educated are demographics associated with this phenomenon.

The relationship maintenance function either keeps viewers coming back or may persist in a PSR due to the sensationalism of *Infowars* content -- and the "button pushing" viewers may experience from watching Jones' rants -- as suggested by the lack of cathartic PSR function. Because most *Infowars* viewers will likely never come face-to-face with Alex Jones, PSRs function as a means of compensation for being in the studio with him.

Remarkably, the findings in this study regarding viewing run parallel to Van Kelegom and Wright's (2013) findings regarding self-uncertainty. The authors identified conflict, catharsis, relational maintenance, and compensation functions of II in association with self-uncertainty, much as the present study identified conflict (although marginal after controlling for demographics), catharsis, relational maintenance, compensation, and self-understanding functions as predictors of viewing *Infowars*. Of even more interest is that the catharsis function in the Van Kelegom and Wright (2013) study also shared a negative association with self-uncertainty while the present study identified self-understanding as a predictor of viewing. Taken together, Van Kelegom and Wright (2013) and the present study suggests a relationship between self-uncertainty, the self-understanding function of PSR, and *Infowars* viewing, which may be a simple issue of uses and gratification and uncertainty reduction. Viewers may use *Infowars* as an information source in response to a need to reduce uncertainty, the byproduct of which is an increased self-understanding function of existing PSRs with Alex Jones.

Limitations and Further Study

This study is limited by the same issues as many other surveys: the data are correlational and cross-sectional, participation was through self-selection, and data is self-reported. Moreover, the parasocial measures do not explore the actual content of participants' parasocial thinking and focus only on the degree of functioning.

Future research should explore the various attributes of PSRs as identified in II work (e.g., Honeycutt, 2010; Zagacki, Edwards, & Honeycutt, 1992) and PSR (Madison & Porter, 2015; Madison & Porter, 2016). The attributes of PSR include frequency, proactivity, retroactivity, specificity, variety, valence, and self-dominance (Madison & Porter, 2016) and may provide a broader context for understanding PSR functions.

Additional research should also explore the relationships among feelings of self-uncertainty, the PSR function of self-understanding, and gratifications sought through various entertainment or news media. This is of particular importance in light of increasingly questionable information disseminated through a variety of news sources. Further research into this particular area has implications for not only the development of PSR/II, but theories of uncertainty reduction, selective exposure, third-person effect, and others.

Finally, and because this study found an association between imagining interpersonal conflict with Jones and diminished credibility of *Infowars,* future research should examine in various domains the relationship between credibility and conflict-linkage. For example, while imaginary interpersonal conflict is associated with Trump being assigned less credibility (Madison, Honeycutt, Covington, and Auter, 2019), the phenomenon of imagined conflict reducing credibility may also extend to other celebrities for whom audiences have disdain. This phenomenon may also be related to what Abramowitz and Webster (2016) call "negative partisanship," which involves inducing negative affect toward an opposing party and promoting loyalty within one's own party. Negative partisanship appears to be an increasingly popular Twitter strategy among brands (Ratcliff, 2014), and may be of particular interest to those in the fields of marketing, strategic communication, and political communication.

Indeed, the information war is real (Westneat, 2017), and as prophesied by the character Brian O'Blivion in the movie *Videodrome*, "The battle for the mind of North America will be fought in the video arena: the Videodrome," or YouTube. The battle however, is now a global phenomenon. Between viral conspiracy theories such as #pizzagate, the proliferation fake news in social media, enflamed divisions in western civilization, automated bots, trolls and fake social media pages, researchers can no longer ignore the functional power that parasocial relationships have in people's lives. It is critical that researchers recognize the power that parasocial relationships have in shaping public opinion among audiences.

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