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Summer of 45 -- The Parasocial Effects on Attitude Certainty and Attitude Clarity Toward Donald Trump

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Attitudes held with certainty may serve as powerful determinants of relevant political behavior, such as voting. Despite a large body of research in attitude certainty, minimal work has explored two of its distinct components: attitude correctness and attitude clarity. This study investigated how parasocial interaction (PSI) with former President Trump influences perceived correctness and clarity of attitudes toward him.

Over 400 Amazon MTurk workers completed a survey. Data revealed the more participants engaged in PSI with Trump, the more they reported having negative attitudes toward him. PSI with Trump also predicted perceived attitude correctness and attitude clarity. Analysis suggested as participants engaged in cognitive activities such as evaluation and observation, perceived attitude correctness and clarity toward Trump became stronger. Conversely, as participants experienced positive affect toward Trump, perceived attitude correctness and clarity weakened. Behavioral PSI responses, although not the strongest influence, predicted perceived correctness but not attitude clarity.

Keywords: parasocial, Trump, attitude certainty, attitude clarity, attitude correctness

Media effects research has shifted in recent decades from focusing on passive audiences to focusing on active audiences. Viewers actively interpret media content according to their subjective views (Capello, 2019). The audiovisual nature of television affords viewers to become psychologically involved in mediated content. During media exposure, viewers cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally process content and focus on certain media personae in a process known as parasocial interaction (PSI) (Klimmt, et al., 2006). Parasocial processes may lead to specific outcomes, such as attachment (Cole & Leets, 1999), impulse buying (Park & Lennon, 2004), and attitude formation and reinforcement (Shin, 2016).

Attitudes shaped through television are especially crucial for prominent politicians, such as Donald Trump. Consequences of favorable and stable attitudes toward media figures may lead to more significant consequences, such as reducing stereotypes (Ramasubramaniam, 2015), support and fundraising for social causes (Park, 2016), and voting during an election (Rosema, 2006).

Attitude certainty refers to the degree to which individuals are confident about their attitudes toward an attitude object (Gross, et al., 1995). Those attitudes held with greater certainty tend to persist, resist attacks, and predict likelihood of behavior (Tormala & Rucker, 2007; Tormala & Rucker, 2017). Although past studies have increased an understanding of relationships between psychological attributes and attitude certainty (e.g. Smith, et al., 2007), relationships between psychological attributes in PSI and attitude certainty toward famous politicians is less developed.

PSI with President Trump has been studied widely in social psychology (Paravati, et al., 2019), communication (Cohen &Madison et al., Holbert, 2018), political communication (Madison et al., 2019), and other fields. The majority of these studies examined parasocial relationships (PSRs), one-sided relationships with a mediated persona that develop over time beyond media exposure (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This is theoretically distinct from PSI, which refers to viewers' psychological responses to a media persona during or immediately after viewing (Klimmt et al., 2006). Since the interactions between viewers and a media persona can occur as soon as they encounter the persona on television, it is reasonable to consider the significant effects of PSI on attitudes toward the persona.

Past studies linked the effects of PSRs with Trump to attitudes, which then were associated with behavioral consequences, such as voting during the presidential election (Cohen & Holbert, 2018). Previous work hasn't explored the strength of attitudes toward Trump. Certainty is one of many strength-related attributes of attitudes (Krosnick & Petty, 1995), and reflects how confident individuals feel about their attitudes toward attitude objects (Gross, et al., 1995). Attitudes that are stable and firmly held with certainty, particularly those toward political actors, are key determinants of subsequent relevant behaviors (Krosnick & Petty, 1995).

This study assessed the relationships between PSI, attitudes toward Trump, and attitude certainty. Incorporating attitude certainty provides a framework that might explain the strength of attitudes formed through parasocial processes. This study contributes to parasocial and attitude literature as it fills gaps that have not been addressed in past research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Parasocial Interaction

The concept of parasocial interaction (PSI) has been widely studied in media and communication literature since Horton and Wohl (1956) introduced it. PSI is defined explicitly as viewers' reactions to a persona depicted on the television during exposure (Klimmt et al., 2006). These responses are one-sided, nondialectical, and without mutual development between the audience and the persona (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Despite the missing feedback from the persona, audiences still perceive them as a model, a friend, and/or a comforter (Horton & Wohl, 1956). A number of scholars contend that television is a suitable means of fostering PSI due to its ability to confront the audiences with an intimate and in-person association with a media persona (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Schramm & Hartmann, 2008; Schramm &Wirth, 2010). Through a television screen, audiences learn to identify and interact with the personality that frequently appears in mass media (Levy, 1979).

The media persona often enacts linguistic and embodied forms directed at the viewers (Streeck, 2008), where they establish "elementary communicative acts which are aimed at establishing contact with the viewers, and thus, interaction" (Gleich, 1997, p.37). PSI occurs when the viewers feel that they are involved in social interaction with the persona (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011), which Horton and Wohl (1956) referred to as an "illusion of intimacy" (p. 217). The intimacy allows the audiences to react to a mediated persona similarly to the way they think, behave, and feel in real-life interactions (Klimmt et al., 2006).

Although a persona may not see the audiences, they may still act and talk directly to the viewers as if they were in the same room. This phenomenon, known as breaking the fourth wall (Auter & Davis, 1991), allows the audiences to be more involved with a mediated persona. PSI may be intensified the more the persona addresses viewers, the more the persona is obtrusively depicted on television, and the more persistently the persona is displayed on the screen during media exposure; PSI is greatly influenced by characteristics of both the persona (physical attractiveness, character attractiveness, and task attractiveness) and the interacting viewers (personality and motivation) (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008).

The two-level model distinguishes PSI into low-level PSI and high-level PSI. In low-level PSI, the PSI processes occur in weak intensities, where the audiences engage in less significant cognitive processing, emotional involvement, and behavioral activities with a media persona (Klimmt et al., 2006). Viewers with high-level PSI show considerably more involvement in cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses toward the persona.

The viewers' first impressions of a persona are based on the limited information the audiences receive; however, the images then lead to subsequent behavior toward the persona (Klimmt et al., 2006). The first few encounters with the persona can be defined as *person recognition*, where the viewers activate memories and knowledge about the persona, they have stored from past media exposures (Klimmt et al., 2006). Previous experiences and knowledge influence the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of PSI. These psychological responses vary in intensity between viewers exposed to the persona for the first time and viewers who have recognized the persona from past media exposures (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008).

PSI consists of cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses generated by television viewers as soon as they encounter a media persona (Klimmt et al., 2006). These responses may change dynamically

within one course of media exposure with each individual, which then forms parasocial patterns between the persona and audience (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008).

Cognitive responses comprise attention to the persona, comprehension of the persona's actions, activation of prior experience, evaluation of the persona, observation, and social comparison between oneself and the persona (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). . Emotional effects in PSI may vary considerably by viewer (Schramm & Wirth, 2010). People with high-level PSI may experience intensified and repeated emotional responses, while people with low-level PSI tend to show weak or no emotional reactions toward a persona (Klimmt et al., 2006). Affective responses in PSI can be categorized according to emphatic reactions, persona-generated emotions, and mood contagion (Klimmt et al., 2006). Also, viewer response to a mediated persona also include behavioral forms that are easily observable. These behavioral processes typically occur alongside cognitive and affective reactions but can be empirically distinguished from the two. Such behaviors can be categorized into motor activity, physical activity, and verbal utterances (Klimmt et al., 2006).

Attitudes and Attitude Certainty

Attitudes are the global evaluations of other people, issues, abstract concepts, or other "attitude objects" (Petty, et al., 2003). They are formed through cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes, or exclusively on the basis of any of the three components (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). The cognitive processes of attitude formation occur when individuals obtain information about the attitude object through both direct and indirect experiences.

The basis of affective responses in attitude formation has been explored in studies under a variety of conditioning models (e.g., Insko, 1965). Zajonc (1980) found that affective responses, which occur immediately and are not mediated by thinking processes, can influence evaluations and attitudes of an attitude object. Eagly and Chaiken (1993) argue individuals tend to convey attitudes consistent with previous behavioral responses.

Many studies found attitudes can be very stable, difficult to change, and consequential (Krosnick & Petty, 1995). Attitudes, such as those held toward politicians, serve as powerful determinants of relevant behaviors, e.g., voting in elections (see Gabriel et al., 2018), depending on the strength of the attitudes. Attitude strength is the degree to which attitudes are resistant and persistent, affect information processing, and guide behavior (Krosnick & Petty, 1995). Four categories of attitude dimensions contribute to the strength of an attitude: aspects of attitudes (valence and extremity), aspects of attitude structure (accessibility, knowledge, and evaluations), subjective beliefs about attitudes and attitude object (personal relevance, importance, and certainty), and cognitive processes (elaboration).

Attitude Certainty. Attitude certainty is part of an extensive body of dimensions that contribute to attitude strength. Specifically, certainty is one factor that determines the durability and impact of an attitude (Krosnick & Petty, 1995). People who are strongly certain of their attitudes are more resistant to change (Tormala & Rucker, 2007) and are more persistent in their attitudes over time (Tormala & Rucker, 2017).

Gross, Holtz, and Miller (1995) described certainty as the degree to which individuals are confident about their attitudes toward an object. It reflects a secondary cognition (e.g. being certain of one's opinion of an attitude object) that accompanies a primary cognition (e.g. the opinion of an attitude object) (Petrocelli, et al., 2007). Attitude certainty is independent of the attitude itself and is distinct from attitude valence and extremity (Tormala & Rucker, 2017). Attitude certainty is inherently

subjective, meaning it varies in intensity and is independent of factual accuracy. An individual might be sure of their positive attitudes toward smoking even though empirical evidence clearly shows smoking will negatively impact their health. These attitudes are then bolstered by attitude-consistent selective exposure (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2011), where the individual seeks information to support their decision to smoke and avoids information about the health effects of smoking.

Attitude certainty is a crucial factor influencing an attitude's impact and durability (Krosnick & Petty, 1995) and plays a role in mediating attitudes and behavior. Tormala and Rucker (2007) classified the consequences of attitude certainty into attitude-behavior correspondence, resistance to attack, persistence over time, and information processing. As attitude certainty increases, so does the tendency of attitudes to predict individuals' behavior (e.g., Tormala & Petty, 2002). Individuals who are certain of their attitudes may perceive these attitudes as accurate and appropriate to guide behavior (Tormala & Rucker, 2007).

Tormala and Rucker (2007) suggest that attitudes held with high certainty are more resistant to persuasive attacks compared to attitudes with low certainty. One possibility for this phenomenon is that people with high certainty would be more aggressive in counterarguing (Tormala & Rucker, 2007). They make predictions of what reality should look like and encourage others to think the same way; this leads them more efforts through counterarguing to hold on to attitudes (Swan & Ely, 1984). Attitude resistance increases as people are more invested in the attitudes they hold (Tormala & Rucker, 2007).

Previous studies demonstrated that high certainty is linked to decreased information processing (Edwards, 2003). Individuals with high certainty tend to perceive that they already possess sufficient knowledge and do not need to expend more effort in information processing (Tormala & Rucker, 2007). The decreased thinking process characteristic is similar to the concept of cognitive misers, which refers to individuals who prefer to think as little as possible when the information is easily accessible (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

Attitude certainty can be separated into two underlying constructs: attitude correctness and attitude clarity (Petrocelli et al., 2007). Through a series of studies, Petrocelli et al. (2007) showed that despite the correlation between correctness and clarity, the two constructs are distinct with unique antecedents and consequences for each construct.

Attitude Correctness. Petrocelli et al. (2007) posit that if an individual is certain about their attitudes, they may feel confident that the attitudes they hold are valid, correct, and justified. Attitude correctness is formed through metacognitive activities to gauge the validity of an attitude object (Cheatham & Tormala, 2015) and predicts some behavioral actions. Petrocelli et al. (2007) further argue that people with a high level of attitude correctness tend to believe that others should have the same attitude. According to Cheatham and Tormala (2015), people with a high degree of attitude correctness tend to share their opinions with others as well as to persuade others to hold the same views as theirs. Petrocelli et al. (2007) also suggest that comparing oneself to others is another way to validate an individual's attitudes. The more people in a community share an individual’s attitude, the more certain that individual becomes that their attitudes are the correct ones to have.

Attitude Clarity. Attitude clarity refers to the extent an individual is aware of their true attitudes toward an attitude object (Petrocelli et al., 2007). It results from metacognitive activities aimed at better identifying one's true evaluation. The more often people express certain attitudes toward an attitude object, the more they are certain of their attitudes (Cheatham & Tormala, 2015). Repeated expression of

the same attitudes will be more likely to result in accurately expressed attitudes in the future (Petrocelli et al., 2007). People with a high degree of attitude clarity are more likely to share their views with others, which is a shared characteristic of attitude correctness and attitude clarity (Cheatham & Tomala, 2015).

PSI and Attitudes

Previous studies have shown positive association between parasocial phenomena and attitudes (Hartmann, et al., 2008; Rubin & Step, 2000). Just as people develop positive or negative attitudes toward other people in real-life interactions, mass media users develop certain attitudes toward mediated personae through repeated exposure. Rubin (2002) posits that PSI includes active and involved media use, which tends to affect media users' attitudes. Furthermore, when mediated by identification, PSI may reinforce attitudes, beliefs, and behavior (Brown, 2015).

PSI has an attitudinal influence toward talk radio hosts (Rubin & Step, 2000), leads to more positive attitudes toward robots (Lee et al., 2011), and PSI with narrative involvement while watching a television political commentator resulted in attitude changes (Dunn, 2017). Changes in attitudes are also found to increase the likelihood of behavior change, such as increased political participation, increased political involvement, and voting (Dunn, 2017).

Viewers who watch political figures on television may develop a sense of intimacy and react to them as if they were in the same room (Streeck, 2008). Sense of intimacy between the figures and the viewers may encourages positive evaluations of politicians. Past studies have shown that PSRs and PSIs play roles in predicting attitudes toward Donald Trump (Cohen & Holbert, 2006). Paravati et al. (2019) discovered that parasocial bonds formed through Twitter, which occur unconsciously and unintentionally, reinforce pre-existing attitudes toward Donald Trump. Meanwhile, Gabriel et al. (2018) specifically examined the effects of PSI with Donald Trump that developed through the television show *The Apprentice*. They found PSI was a strong predictor of attitudes toward Trump and a more intense parasocial experience led to more positive attitudes toward him. Based on the previous work:

H1: There is a positive correlation between PSI processing and attitudes toward Donald Trump.

PSI and Attitude Certainty

A low level of uncertainty leads to a high level of intimacy (Berger & Calabrese, 1974). One of the basic aspects of the development of parasocial relationships is uncertainty reduction (Perse & Rubin, 1989). Parasocial contacts, just as with interpersonal contacts, lead to a decrease in uncertainty about other people (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Increased PSI, which occurs alongside increased amount of television viewing, may lead to reduction of uncertainty (Perse & Rubin, 1989). As uncertainty decreases, the tendency to develop more intimate PSRs increases (Cole & Leets, 1999).

Scholarly research of attitude certainty has extended to focus on psychological processes (e.g. cognitive elaboration) and attitude certainty (Tormala & Petty, 2004; Barden & Petty, 2008). When cognitive elaboration is high, people are more certain of their attitudes and resist persuasive attacks during counterarguments (Tormala & Petty, 2004). Greater cognitive processes lead to higher attitude certainty, while lesser cognitive processing is associated with doubts (Barden & Petty, 2008). Less attention has been paid to the relatively new attitude certainty constructs: attitude correctness and attitude clarity.

***Attitude Correctness*.** Scholars have associated social consensus with attitude correctness. Attitude correctness is defined as the degree to which people are confident that their attitudes are valid and correct (Petrocelli et al., 2007). Individuals typically attempt to hold correct attitudes (Hart et al., 2009), while social consensus, coupled with cognitive processes, enables individuals to assess how "correct" their attitudes are (Petrocelli et al., 2007). Thus, people will be more likely to seek validation from social consensus to be certain that their attitudes are the “right” ones to possess (Clarkson, et al., 2013).

As a main source of information, mass media served as agents of social control in the past. Television, for example, had the power to build consensus among its audience as it "embodies the universality of communication" (Carpignano, et al., 1990, p. 51). It effectively set the agenda for many audience reactions during viewing, and audiences’ collective reactions to the media were patterned (Lull, 1982). The reality portrayed on television subsequently determined the way society should proceed, where a large scale of social consensus was achieved (Lull, 1982). Television programs, such as news, played a key role in achieving social consensus (McCombs, 1997). Increased exposure to television news led to increased community consensus (Shaw & Martin, 1992).

Based on the previously discussed literature on social consensus, PSI may predict perceived attitude correctness through the ability of television in shaping social consensus. Thus, the following research questions further explore the role of PSI in predicting attitude correctness:

> **RQ1:** How well does PSI processing predict perceived correctness of attitudes toward Donald Trump?
>
> **RQ2:** Which PSI sub-process has the strongest predictive power regarding perceived correctness of attitudes toward Donald Trump?

Attitude Clarity. Attitude clarity refers to how certain an individual is of their true evaluation of an attitude object (Rios DeMarree, & Statzer, 2014) and is intensified through repeated expressions of the attitudes (Prislin, et al., 2011). In the domain of source interactivity (i.e. users' ability to react to online political content by voting or commenting), the interactivity of online platforms was found to foster greater clarity of one's political attitudes, which contributes to attitude reinforcement (Sude, Pearson, & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2021).

On the other hand, Prislin, et al. (2011) examined the association between social status and the clarity of attitudes toward issues related to legalization of marijuana. They found that social status significantly affects attitude clarity. People perceive they earn a higher status by taking a certain attitudinal position and become clearer in their attitudes toward the issues under consideration.

Most of the extant research on attitude certainty primarily sought to understand how external factors, such as online platforms and social status, influence attitude clarity. To date, no work had been done to explore how subjective psychological responses, such as PSI, might play a role in one's clarity of an attitude object. In light of this deficit, the following research questions emerge:

> **RQ3:** How well does PSI processing predict perceived clarity of attitudes toward Donald Trump?

RQ4: Which PSI sub-process has the strongest predictive power regarding perceived clarity of attitudes toward Donald Trump?

METHODS

Participants

A total of 404 Amazon MTurk Master workers responded to the survey. Master qualification is a designation for workers who have demonstrated a high rate of success in performing a wide range of tasks from requesters (Loepp & Kelly, 2020). Individuals may not apply for the qualification. Master workers are considered high-reputation workers who are more likely to produce high-quality results, hence, providing quality assurance (Loepp & Kelly, 2020).

Of the 404 respondents, 52% were male, 47.5% were female, and 0.5% were other/prefer not to say. The average age of the respondents was 44 years old (*SD* = 11.90). Around 80.4% respondents identified as Caucasian/White, 7.4% indicated they were African-American/Black, 7.4% indicated they were Asian-American/Asian, 2.5% were Latin-American/Hispanic, 2% were "other", and 0.2% was Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander.

On the household income scale, respondents averaged 4.03 (*SD* = 1.86), which corresponds to a range of $45,000-$60,000 per year. Of all the participants, 43.1% said they held a bachelor's degree, 31.4% reported they had some college level of education, 13.1% indicated they completed high school, 8.9% held a master's degree, 2.2% held a terminal degree, 0.7% held other types of educational degree, and 0.5% had less than a high school education.

Table 1

Sociodemographic data

Participant demographics		*n*	%
Gender			
	Male	210	52
	Female	192	47.5
	Other/prefer not to say	2	.5
Race:	Caucasian/White	325	80.4
	African-American/Black	30	7.4
	Asian-American/Asian	30	7.4
	Latin-American/Hispanic	10	2.5
	Other	8	2
	Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	1	.2
Annual household income			
	Less than $15,000	32	7.9
	$15,000 - $30,000	70	17.4
	$30,000 - $45,000	70	17.4
	$45,000 - $60,000	73	18.1
	$60,000 - $75,000	61	15.1
	$75,000 - $90,000	34	8.4
	More than $90,000	62	15.4
	Missing	1	.2

Highest educational level		
Bachelor's degree	174	43.1
Some college	127	31.4
High school	53	13.1
Master's degree	36	8.9
Terminal degree	9	2.2
Other	3	.7
Less than a high school	2	.5

Note. Submissions that did not answer certain demographic questions were listed as "missing." $N = 404$. Participants were on average 44 years old ($SD = 11.90$).

Procedure

After receiving IRB approval, a questionnaire was distributed through MTurk using the Qualtrics platform. All participants were required to read and indicate their consent to participate before continuing with the survey. Each participant received monetary compensation of $0.75 after completing the survey. The data were downloaded into an SPSS file for analysis.

Measures

PSI Processing. Participants responded to a 14-item adapted version of the PSI-Process Scale (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). The PSI-Process Scale measures cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of PSI. An example item was: "I carefully followed the behavior of Donald Trump" and was measured on a Likert scale of 1 to 7 (1= *not at all*, 7= *very much so*). As suggested by Wong, et al. (2017), the items were averaged to create a PSI index in which higher scores indicated favorable attitudes toward Trump.

Attitudes Toward Trump. The 9-item Trump attitude scale (Choma & Hanoch, 2016) was administered to assess attitudes toward Donald Trump. Participants indicated agreement on a scale 1 to 7 (1= *completely disagree*, 7= *completely agree*). An example item included "Donald Trump has the American people's best interests in mind." All items were averaged to create an index in which higher scores indicated favorable attitudes toward Trump.

Attitude Certainty. Participants were asked to report the degree to which they were certain of their attitudes toward Trump using the attitude certainty scale adapted from Petrocelli et al. (2007). The scale consisted of four attitude clarity items and three attitude correctness items on a scale 1 to 7 (1= *very uncertain*, 7= *very certain*). Petrocelli et al. (2007) posit, "clarity and correctness can be measured separately and statistically differentiated in their contributions to attitude certainty" (p. 33). An example item for attitude clarity was "To what extent is your attitude toward Donald Trump clear in your mind?"and an example item for attitude correctness was "How certain are you that your attitude toward Donald Trump is the correct attitude to have?" The items were compiled into indices of each.

Demographics. Demographic data were collected at the end of the survey. Participants were asked to indicate their gender, age, ethnicity, education level, and estimated annual household income.

RESULTS

Table 2 shows the properties for each scale index used in the study.

Table 2

Scale properties

Scales	Items	*N*	*M*	*SD*	Cronbach's Alpha
Parasocial interaction	11	401	3.85	.91	.78
Cognitive	5	403	4.43	1.20	.77
Affective	4	403	2.97	1.53	.77
Behavioral	3	402	3.74	1.57	.76
Trump attitude	9	403	2.88	1.94	.97
Attitude certainty					
Attitude clarity	4	404	6.34	.92	.94
Attitude correctness	3	403	5.71	1.23	.91

H1 stated, "There is a positive correlation between PSI processing and attitudes toward Donald Trump." Pearson correlation analysis showed that PSI processing and attitudes toward Trump were negatively correlated, $r(399) = -.34$, $p < .01$. The data did not support the hypothesis. However, it demonstrated a significant relationship between PSI processing and attitudes toward Trump, albeit in the opposite of the predicted direction.

To answer RQ1 and RQ2, the researcher created a regression analysis summary for the variables used to predict attitude correctness as presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Regression analysis summary predicting attitude correctness

Variables	*B*	*SE B*	*β*	*t*	Sig. (*p*)
Parasocial interaction	.55	.06	.40	8.76	< .001**
Cognitive	.19	.05	.18	3.50	< .001**
Affective	-.17	.04	-.21	-4.09	< .001**
Behavioral	.14	.04	.17	3.18	.002**

Note. R^2 = Parasocial interactions (.16) and attitude correctness (.20), *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$

RQ1 asked, "How well does PSI processing predict people's perceived correctness of their attitudes toward Donald Trump?" Simple linear regression was performed to answer the research question. The results revealed that PSI processing ($\beta = .40$, $p < .01$) significantly predicted attitude correctness; $F(1, 397) = 76.79$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = .16$.

RQ2 asked, "Which PSI sub-process has the strongest predictive power regarding people's perceived correctness of their attitudes toward Donald Trump?" Multiple linear regression analysis revealed the regression model with cognitive, affective, and behavioral variables explained 20.4% of the variance and the model was a significant predictor of attitude correctness; $F(3, 394) = 33.67$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = .20$, $R^2_{\text{adjusted}} = .20$. Cognitive PSI was found to significantly contribute to predicting attitude correctness ($\beta = .18$, $p < .01$), whereas affective PSI negatively predicted attitude correctness ($\beta = -.21$, $p < .01$). Behavioral PSI was one of the predictors ($\beta = .17$, $p < .01$), however it was slightly weaker compared with cognitive PSI.

Table 4 exhibits the results of a regression analysis for the variables used to predict attitude clarity in RQ3 and RQ4.

Table 4

Regression analysis summary predicting attitude clarity

Variables	*B*	*SE B*	*β*	*t*	Sig. (*p*)
Parasocial interaction	.33	.05	.32	6.82	< .001**
Cognitive	.19	.04	.24	4.58	< .001**
Affective	-.12	.03	-.21	-3.87	< .001**
Behavioral	.03	.03	.05	.94	.35

Note. R^2 = Parasocial interactions (.11) and attitude clarity (.17), *p < .05, **p < .01

RQ3 asked, "How well does PSI processing predict people's perceived clarity of their attitudes toward Donald Trump?" Simple linear regression was performed to answer the research question. The results revealed that PSI processing (β = .32, p < .01) significantly predicted attitude clarity; $F(1, 398)$ = 46.46, p < .01, R^2 = .11, $R^2_{adjusted}$ = .10.

RQ4 asked, "Which PSI sub-process has the strongest predictive power regarding people's perceived clarity of their attitudes toward Donald Trump?" The PSI Process Scales were broken down into cognitive, affective, and behavioral indices per Schramm and Hartmann (2008). Multiple linear regression showed the model with cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions as predictor variables explained 16.6% of the variance and the model was a significant predictor of attitude clarity; $F(3, 395)$ = 26.22, p < .01, R^2 = .17, $R^2_{adjusted}$ = .16. Cognitive PSI was found to significantly contribute to predicting attitude clarity (β = .24, p < .01), whereas affective PSI negatively predicted attitude clarity (β = -.21, p < .01) and behavioral PSI did not significantly predict attitude clarity (β = .05, p = *N.S.).*

DISCUSSION

PSI Processing and Attitudes Toward Trump

Contrary to the proposed hypothesis, the present study found that PSI processing negatively correlated with attitudes toward Trump. As PSI processing increased, participants tended to have unfavorable attitudes toward the persona of Trump. One possible explanation for the finding is that Gabriel et al.'s (2018) study explicitly focused on PSI as Trump developed his persona through the highly scripted and edited reality television show *The Apprentice*. Through *The Apprentice*, the Trump persona had 14 seasons of carefully edited exposure to imprint a presidential image, which led many viewers to develop positive attitudes toward him through parasocial experiences (Gabriel et al., 2018).

The data in the present study supports Dibble and Rosaen (2011) in that people also parasocially react to disliked media figures, also known as negative PSI (Hartmann, et al., 2008). Previous studies typically construed PSI as a positive experience (Dibble & Rosaen, 2011; Tian & Hoffner, 2010), where viewers perceive the figures as their role models or friends (Horton & Wohl, 1956). However, just as people in real-life interactions would react to disliked others in ways that do not imply a sense of friendship, they could also react in the same ways toward certain media figures through feelings of

antipathy, disgust, hatred, and other adverse emotions (Hartmann, 2008; Hartmann et al., 2008; Tian & Hoffner, 2010).

Hate-watching may also explain this finding. Hate-watching is defined as repeatedly watching hated people, things, or content for the purpose of achieving some gratification (Madison et al., 2020). Many people seek out ideologically "dissonant" information for entertainment, contrary to the deeply-ingrained idea in the literature that audiences seek consonance in their media choices (Madison, at al., 2019; Madison et al., 2020). Audiences are entertained by hate-watching, and this type of media enjoyment has been considered the side-effect of PSI (Klimmt et al., 2006).

PSI And Attitude Correctness

PSI processing predicted both attitude correctness and attitude clarity. The more participants parasocially interacted with the Trump persona, the more they perceived their attitudes toward Trump were correct and clear. Perse and Rubin's (1989) proposition regarding PSI and uncertainty reduction contexts supports the idea that as PSI is intensified, so is perceived intimacy with the personae, which then leads to an increase in certainty about them. The intimacy in PSI is achieved through shared experiences between viewers and the personae existing only during media exposure (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Viewers become familiar with the media figures through observation and interpretation and thus, increase their certainty of the figures. The current study provides evidence for a more specific mapping of this relationship within the context of relatively new constructs of attitude certainty: correctness and clarity.

PSI processing was a significant predictor of participants' perceived attitude correctness toward Trump. Parasocial engagement with the Trump persona validated "correct" and "justified" attitudes toward him which increased perceived correctness. While correctness has been closely associated with social consensus and social comparison as attempts to validate one's attitude, it appeared that participants were able to assess correctness merely through PSI processes. People tend to surround themselves with others who share the same beliefs and lifestyles, including political views. Studies show that Americans are becoming less willing to date and marry a partner with differing political beliefs (Miller, 2020) and political conversations with family or friends with opposing views may cause the relationships to fall apart (Smith, 2020).

In the present study PSI processing was a significant predictor of participants' perceived attitude clarity toward Trump. As participants parasocially engaged with the Trump persona, they felt that the attitudes they maintained were clear. The relationship between PSI and clarity may be explained through the concept of self-intimacy. Self-intimacy is defined as the state of being connected with oneself and being aware of one's true feelings (Pearlman & Ian, 1995). Self-intimacy enables an individual to better understand themselves and how they see themselves. In PSI, as people become "intimate" with media figures, their evaluation of the figures may become more salient, thus, enhancing clarity.

PSI Subprocesses, Attitude Correctness, and Attitude Clarity

Cognitive processing was the strongest predictor of attitude correctness. The findings are consistent with the previous claim that correctness and clarity result from cognitive processes (Petrocelli et al., 2007). The results also support existing literature in attitude certainty which holds that higher cognitive elaboration leads to higher certainty (Barden & Petty, 2008; Tormala & Petty, 2004).

Cognitive PSI allows media viewers to form judgments of the public figures depicted on the screen (Klimmt et al., 2006). Meanwhile, correctness intensifies as these viewers find their judgments of

the media persona are justified and valid. Political scientists postulate that in evaluating political leaders, such as Trump, individuals would engage cognitive processing of their knowledge or subjective experience and weigh the leaders' strengths or weaknesses (Krosnick, 2001).

Cognitive processing was the strongest predictor for attitude clarity. As the participants engaged in cognitive activities, such as paying attention to the persona in the media, accessing information stored memories, and evaluating the persona's behavior on the screen, they experienced greater clarity in their attitudes toward him. People's metacognitive activities aimed at better identifying their true attitude result in greater clarity (Cheatham & Tormala, 2015). Attitude clarity is primarily affected by repeated expression of the same attitude (Petrocelli et al., 2007; Prislin, et al., 2011). While no extant research has directly examined the relationship between cognitive processes and attitude clarity, scholars have suggested the link between evaluation of an attitude object as part of cognitive functions, and repeated attitudinal expression (Fazio, et al., 1982). The strength of the evaluation toward an object determines the accessibility of an attitude, which leads to repeatedly expressing the same attitude toward the given object (Fazio et al., 1982). Thus, this finding offers evidence that cognitive processes facilitate greater attitude clarity through repeated attitudinal expression, even when not mediated by attitude accessibility. Those attitudes formed through high elaboration are also more likely to be recalled when needed (Rucker & Petty, 2006).

Affective processing negatively predicted correctness and clarity. The findings bridge the gap between affective processing in PSI, attitude correctness, and attitude clarity. As the participants engaged in affective responses with the persona on the screen, such as empathy with Trump, they felt their attitudes toward him were invalid, incorrect and unclear. Feelings and emotions are processed more quickly than thoughts and therefore form precognitively (Damasio, 2000). In affect-based attitudes, affective reactions serve as primary and powerful influences to form such attitudes with minimal cognitive appraisal (Edwards, 1990).

The relationship between affective processing and correctness is best explained through the notion of affective biases. Affect could influence judgments by making biased information stored in memory more easily accessible (Clore & Schnall, 2005; Strack, 1992). Previous studies have shown people sometimes compare themselves to othersto validate attitudes and opinions (Petrocelli et al., 2007). Correctness tends to increase when people find they share the same attitude with the majority. People also have the tendency to surround themselves with others who share the same political views and lifestyle (Miller, 2020).

One possible explanation for the inverse relationship between affective processing and clarity illustrated by the model of affect is information. People try to determine the informational value of their affective reactions as a basis for judgment and attitudes. If they consider these reactions to be sound basis for judgment, they will incorporate them in attitude formation (Schwarz & Clore, 1983). Otherwise, they will discard them (Albarracin & Kumkale, 2016). People with high ability and motivation to think are more likely to base their attitudes on cognitive rather than affective processes (Albarracin & Kumkale, 2016). This indicates that the participants in this study would find their affective reactions to be irrelevant as the basis for their judgment toward Trump. They could not identify their true attitudes toward him by merely considering their affective response (an increase in affective reactions caused a decrease in clarity).

Lastly, behavioral responses tend to be uncommon in most media exposure situations (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). Even though behavioral responses can be separately observed and analyzed from internal PSI processes (cognitive and affective), these responses are always accompanied by either cognitive or affective elements (Klimmt et al., 2006). The present study found that behavioral processing predicted attitude correctness but not clarity, albeit not the strongest predictor. As participants behaviorally engaged with the persona during exposure, such as commenting, smiling, or expressing disagreement or agreement, they may have felt their attitudes toward Trump were more justified, correct, and valid.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The current research has several limitations. First, the scope of this study is limited only to the degree of correctness and clarity without investigating further into the behavioral aspects of the respondents. Both correctness and clarity have a significant role in guiding behavior. Future studies should investigate behavioral aspects to better understand people's perceived correctness and clarity with their behavior.

Second, the survey was distributed right after the 2020 presidential election. Most mainstream media focused on Donald Trump's loss, legal disputes surrounding the election, and the Capitol Hill riot, which some said was provoked by Trump (e.g., Tanfani, et al., 2021). A recent study showed 95% of Trump's coverage on major broadcast networks cast him in a negative light, which meant the viewers heard 150 more negative comments about Trump than Joe Biden (Smith, 2020). Thus, future research should address the valence (positive or negative) of media content in portraying the public figure under study, which will provide a clear sense of how PSI's direction (positive or negative) may be affected by the type of content.

Third, this study was cross-sectional with self-selected participation. Because attitudes may fluctuate over time, a cross-sectional analysis may be misleading if used as a proxy for longitudinal relations. Finally, participants were recruited through Amazon MTurk. Despite the diverse nature of MTurk workers in terms of demographic dimensions, they cannot be considered a representation of the American population (Ross, Irani, Silberman, Zaldivar, & Tomlinson, 2010). Thus, the results presented in this study may not be generalized to the entire population.

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