**Southwestern Mass Communication Journal**

A journal of the Southwest Education Council for Journalism & Mass Communication

ISSN 0891-9186 | Vol. 34, No. 2 | Spring 2019

# Credibility and Attributes of Parasocial Relationships With Alex Jones

**T. Phillip Madison, Emily N. Covington, Kaitlyn Wright, and Timothy Gaspard**
University of Louisiana at Lafayette

This study examines parasocial relationships (PSRs), perceived credibility *Infowars* host Alex Jones, and viewing frequency. Through our sample of Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) users (N = 584), we explored which attributes of PSRs are related to perceived credibility of Alex Jones and viewing propensity. Variety in PSR imaginative sequences predicts perceived credibility, and valence predicts viewing. Demographics, particularly age, education, and help predict the influence of these particular attributes of PSR on viewing, while race (and education to some extent) influences how valence, variety, and specificity predict perceived credibility. This research highlights the value of parasocial research as scholars navigate our media landscape.

*Keywords:* Parasocial relationships, parasocial interaction, PSR, PSI, news credibility, fake news, Alex Jones, *Infowars*, quantitative, MTurk

**Suggested citation:**

Madison, T. P., Covington, E. N., Wright, K., & Gaspard, T. (2019). Credibility and Attributes of Parasocial Relationships With Alex Jones. Southwestern Mass Communication Journal, 34(2). Retrieved from http://swecjmc.wp.txstate.edu.

Fake news is nothing new and has been with us for millennia. "Beware of Greeks bearing gifts" refers to the Trojan Horse delivered to the ancient city of Troy, out of which emerged soldiers who slaughtered the locals. The word "Trojan Horse" has also come to refer to a type of program that sneaks into a user's computer for nefarious purposes, such as stealing information or damaging the system (*Trojan Horse*, 2017). Parallels between ancient war tactics and modern propaganda tactics are remarkable, and, as Westneat (2017) argues, "The information war is real and we are losing it" (paragraph 25).

The specific uses of fake news and other forms of propaganda are limitless and have transformed American mainstreams in the past. In the nineteenth century we also saw a shift in the American culture in which a consumer economy replaced a socially-oriented barter economy, leading to what Schudson (1978) called a "commercial revolution in the American press," which formed the business model upon "which the mainstream of American journalism has since followed" (p. 17). The result was that "a culture of the market became a more pervasive feature of human consciousness" (p. 58). At the end of the nineteenth century, "the Age of Exposition," as Postman (1985) explains, "was replaced by the Age of Show Business" (p.63). Show business, as Leach (1993) argues, sells people dreams and alleviates guilt associated with consumption.

During the industrial revolution, print organizations and "poison pens" were often used as tools of personal libel and slander for a variety of reasons, ranging from personal revenge for business deals-gone-bad to political character assassination (Leach, 1993; Schudson, 1978). Laws against "yellow journalism" evolved, but have traditionally focused on protecting private citizens rather than public figures. It is difficult for political actors and celebrities to seek compensation for misleading, inaccurate, or false coverage. Social media, in fact, are so far ahead of the legislative machine that libel and slander run rampant -- legally -- and particularly in the political realm.

As the 2016 election intensified, Americans became increasingly conscious of the "fake news" phenomenon and its pervasiveness. The stories we once only saw in supermarket tabloids were becoming viral, and in many cases drew more attention than political information generated by established news sources (Holan, 2016). Today, "Fake news," Holan (2016) argues, "is madeup 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). Conspiracy theories have always been colleagues of fake news.

Alex Jones of Austin, TX is a notorious purveyor of conspiracy theories with growing clout; he has an estimated 5.9 million YouTube viewers (*Last Week Tonight*, 2017) for his show *Infowars*. In fact, Jones and *Infowars* have the backing of President Donald Trump, who appeared on *Infowars* to endorse Jones for his "amazing reputation" and suggested Jones "deserves a Pulitzer" for his reporting. For some Americans, Trump's kind words for Jones may lend *Infowars* even greater credibility. What happens when mass media and public opinion unite in a tabloid-like mediascape filled with "alternative facts" and half-baked, five-topping thin crust conspiracy theories? "Mass media and interpersonal communication," Miller (1986) claimed, "are psychologically interconnected in fundamental ways, that the influence of one domain pervades communicative activities in another" (p. 138).

We are in a critical time for research into parasocial relationships (PSRs), and scholarly research of PSRs has potential to "provide significant insight into the audience-media relationship" (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000, p. 79). PSRs influence our media content choices (Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm,

2006) while the credibility of a celebrity directly affects sales of consumer products (Goldsmith, Lafferty, & Newell, 2000), which are also influenced by content. The proliferation of tabloid-like and fake news driven by commercial or political motives directly threatens the foundation of western democracy and its ingrained principle of open debate in a public sphere. The present study examines the attributes of PSRs and how these attributes relate to viewers' perceived credibility of Alex Jones and how often they watch his show, *Infowars*. Overall, we want to understand the role that PSRs play in the viewing of *Infowars* and offer this study as an exploration of the relationships audiences have with prominent personae in fake news.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Parasocial Relationships (PSRs)

It is normal for people who watch television to experience some degree of PSI, or parasocial interaction (Perse & Rubin, 1989) and an expanding body of research (e.g., Dibble et al., 2016; Klimmt et al., 2006; Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985) has examined the various determinants and outcomes of PSIs with mediated personae. Lingering PSRs are one such outcome. PSRs share many of the components of real-life relationships, but they tend to lack behavioral elements and the same levels of intensity (Cohen, 2003). PSRs often more closely resemble relationships that we have with "good neighbors" rather than close friends and family (Gleich, 1997). As our thoughts wander to the mediated personae that we have seen in electronic media, our PSRs endure beyond the viewing experience through imagined interactions (IIs).

A PSR begins when a person engages in a PSI with some type of performer (Cummins & Cui, 2014; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006) such as an actor or actress, television character, political candidate, or athlete; afterwards, the PSI may progress into a one-sided relationship nurtured by IIs (Madison & Porter, 2015; 2016; Madison, Porter, & Greule, 2016). Honeycutt (2003; 2010) defines imagined interactions (IIs) as a type of functional daydreaming through which we construct cognitive scripts for anticipated future interactions. After exposure to media content, viewers engage in a variety of mental activities that generate changes in behavior (Perse & Rubin, 1989), with IIs among them. Madison and Porter (2015; 2016) argued that PSRs develop through continued II work with a mediated persona after exposure, and suggest they can actually become influential relationships in a person's life.

Much like IIs, we can assess PSRs 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). Similar to what Honeycutt, Vickery, & Hatcher (2015) found with IIs as intrapersonal communication with real-life acquaintances, Madison, Wright, and Gaspard's (2018) data showed a remarkably similar pattern in people's PSR functions with Alex Jones. The functions of PSRs with Alex Jones that are associated with *Infowars* viewing included conflict linkage, compensation, and self-understanding, with catharsis as a significant negative predictor of viewing; in Honeycutt et al.'s (2015) study, these were also the most frequently reported functions of imagined interaction.

### Attributes of PSR

In addition to practical functions in both II and PSR, we also observe different attributes. The attributes of PSR come directly from imagined interaction theory (e.g., Honeycutt, 2003; Honeycutt, 2010) and include retroactivity, frequency, variety, valence, specificity, and self-dominance (Madison & Porter, 2016).

*Retroactivity* refers to thinking back to previous interpersonal interactions (in the case of IIs) or television scenarios (in the case of PSRs). Madison & Porter (2016) argued that we do this frequently, often adding a variety of our own imagined content to the scenarios. They suggested that correlation between retroactivity and valence indicated that imagined scenarios are usually pleasant, and when we put ourselves into an imagined scenario, we tend to be equal participants in the interaction. The retroactivity attribute also correlated with variety in the original TV setups in our mind, and adding variety is what people tend to do in the process of building and rehearsing cognitive scripts.

Retroactivity in PSRs suggests the same conclusion that various TV critics (i.e. Mander, 1978; Postman, 1985) offer; television may limit us to the basic components of the TV reality we have viewed. On the other hand, as Madison & Porter (2016) argue, on top of "borrowing" things or ideas from television, people do retroactive imaginative work. This suggests that TV shows give people starting points from which our imaginations fill in the blanks or add on details to fit the goings-on within our own minds. Because retroactivity has been established in the II and PSR literature as both a function of imagined interaction and PSRs, the study at hand focuses on the attributes of PSR that have received less attention.

PSRs are also characterized by the *frequency* of which a person thinks about a mediated persona. Chory-Assad and Yanen (2005) operationalized the term "frequency" in terms of PSI as how often one views one's favorite performer, but found no relationship between frequency of exposure and PSI. On the other hand, Madison & Porter (2016) found that frequency of imagined interaction with TV personae after viewing experiences was strongly correlated with the variety and retroactivity attributes. People who (relatively) frequently imagine themselves interacting with TV characters think back to various scenarios they have seen on television and "test the water" by adding other elements, often their own (Madison & Porter, 2015). This process of imaginatively testing contingencies is a regularly-identified function of IIs and is related to self-understanding and rehearsal (Honeycutt, 2010). IIs, whether with real people or TV characters, assist people in developing cognitive scripts for later use in face-to-face interactions. In PSRs, the frequency of such IIs with mediated personae revolves around reflecting upon the more compelling television scenes people remember from mediated scenarios (Madison & Porter, 2016) that we have seen on television or other electronic media.

On the other hand, and although frequency is associated with a variety of functions and characteristics of both PSR and II, "it has primarily been viewed as a positive element of close relationships" (Bodie, Honeycutt, & Vickery, 2013, p. 160), and PSRs are one-sided, which would affect a perceived sense of "closeness" with a mediated persona. In other words, frequency may be less likely to predict credibility and viewing of *Infowars*, as such concepts tend to manifest themselves within intrapersonal communication relevant to real-life relationships.

The *variety* of people, places, and things in our own imagined content is related to the frequency of thinking about mediated personae (Honeycutt, 2003). Greater variety in our imaginative work with PSR may reflect the fact that mediated personae, especially TV characters, have become more compelling (Johnson, 2006). With a greater variety of characters and scenarios, we have more raw

imaginative material with which to work. With increasingly compelling entertainment and imaginative material content, in terms of both quality and quantity, we have more opportunities through which to develop PSRs with mediated personae and the shows themselves. Moreover, with more ways to share our own imaginative material, such as through Facebook and other social media outlets, these effects may become more enduring (Madison & Porter, 2015).

*Specificity* is distinct from *variety* and describes the level of detail in the imagery involved in PSR (Zagacki, Edwards, & Honeycutt, 1992; Honeycutt 2010). It is an attribute often-associated with various dimensions of conversational sensitivity and a secure attachment style. Madison and Porter (2015) suggested that specificity in PSR may be more of a personality or other inherent trait of an individual, rather than a trait of the PSR itself.

*Valence*, as Honeycutt (2010) defines the term, "refers to the amount and diversity of emotions that are experienced while envisioning conversation" (p. 5). To simplify for and apply to PSRs, *valence* is a continuum ranging from positive affect to negative affect regarding one's perceived tone of an imagined scenario, and is often negatively or positively correlated with the self-dominance attribute (Honeycutt, et al., 1998-1999).

Americans are the most self-dominant in IIs (McCann & Honeycutt, 2006), likely due to strong values associated with an individualistic culture (as opposed to collectivistic cultures, which are much more common in Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America). Honeycutt (2010) tells us "*self-dominance* occurs when individuals imagine they are doing most of the talking in their IIs" (p. 4). Self-dominance is also associated with unpleasant IIs (*see* Valence); rehearsal, proactivity, and retroactivity are characteristics quite relevant to intrapersonal communication characterized as self-dominant. Self-dominance is a particularly important concept to study regarding PSR; PSRs are one-sided (Horton & Wohl, 1956), and self-dominance is likely to be a variable associated with -- or affected by -- religious or other culturally-oriented variables running through a sample of participants (McCann & Honeycutt, 2006).

Based on previous studies of PSRs (e.g., Madison & Porter, 2015; Madison & Porter, 2016; Madison, Wright, & Gaspard, 2018; Tukachinsky & Stever, 2018), the present study assumes the fundamental connections between mass media effects and interpersonal communication may be found within a person's intrapersonal communication, which includes PSRs. PSRs form during a parasocial interaction during a sequence of viewing a mediated persona (Dibble, Hartmann, Rosaen, 2016) followed by processing of the persona along cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions (Hartmann and Schramm, 2008). PSRs continue after the viewing event, are analogous to the imagined interactions (IIs) that we have with people we currently know or anticipate meeting, and serve various functions in our daily lives (Madison and Porter, 2015; 2016). In other words, IIs constitute PSRs with mediated personae with whom we are unlikely to ever interact.

**News Credibility and Parasocial Relationships**

A person's credibility is a function of other people's perceptions of their credibility (McCroskey & Young, 1981). O'Keefe (1990) defined credibility as ''judgments made by a perceiver concerning the believability of a communicator'' (p. 131) while Dunbar, Jensen, Burgoon, Kelley, Harrison, Adame, and Bernard (2015) operationalized it as "judgments related to another's character, dependability, and truthfulness" (p. 650).

News credibility studies tend to focus on the integrity of political information in online news (Johnson & Kaye, 2010a; Johnson and Kaye, 2010b). Credibility assessment online is often multidimensional and complex, influenced by content, links to sites or news articles, and any number of other characteristics (Chung, Nam, and Stefanone, 2012), and may involve characteristics not yet explored in the literature. Such characteristics affect audience perceptions of online information credibility; the present study explores the attributes of intrapersonal communication associated with PSRs with host Alex Jones of the "news" program *Infowars*. What role does credibility play in a PSR?

Dai, Yan, Wang, & Zhang (2016) explored the role of perceived credibility in parasocial interaction. They found that increased parasocial interaction (PSI) with celebrities led to a sense of greater perceived credibility. While parasocial interaction is largely viewed as something that occurs during a viewing experience (e.g., Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen, 2016; Tukachinsky & Stever, 2018), parasocial relationships develop beyond the viewing experience (Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen, 2016, Madison and Porter, 2015).

Increasingly, researchers are looking at online personalities to explore parasocial relationships. For example, Rasmussen (2018) explored the roles of credibility of and parasocial interaction with YouTube celebrities on consumer purchase intentions and found PSI with YouTube celebrities – as is PSI with soap operas, athletes, and others -- is widespread in the online environment. Alex Jones of *Infowars* is one such celebrity who has been the target of a great deal of controversy for decades.

**Fake News**

Americans became very conscious of fake news during the 2016 election and the topic continues to appear in headlines, social media, memes, and other places. Several factors identified in various bodies of literature have been identified as driving the pervasiveness and consciousness of fake news around the 2016 election: advertising revenue, political mischief, and merchandise (such as herbal supplements) sales.

First, advertising revenue is a powerful driver of the electoral fake news sphere. During the 2016 election Macedonian teenagers perpetrated a revenue-driven scheme through a collection of Facebook accounts and websites, and continue, in fact, to prepare online resources for the 2020 U.S. election (Davey-Attlee, & Soares, 2017). Another part of the fake news sphere comes through private companies backed by the Russian government; Facebook and Twitter recently shut down thousands of Kremlin-backed accounts (Leonnig, Hamburger, & Helderman, 2017), some of which may have included commenting scripts called bots or other automated artificial intelligence (Shane, 2017), specifically designed to enhance ideological dissent and political polarization among Americans. Pro-Trump rallies in Texas and California were actually coordinated from Russia (Albright, 2017), whose advertising, rallying memes, and messages tended to focus on the more extreme ideological views among various American groups.

Second, exploitation of Americans' information diets by foreign powers for the purpose of creating civil unrest is a well-documented practice and relies on "knowing" people whom we will never meet. Much of our responses to fake news, whether we buy into it or not, center around PSRs we have with people whom we see in various media. Such relationships have a tendency to shape our senses of reality and reactions to those senses of reality.

Macedonian teens and the Kremlin are not the only entities shaping our realities and hijacking our PSRs. Conspiracy theorist Alex Jones of Austin, TX sells a variety of alleged health products

through the online show *Infowars*, and regularly makes national news -- mostly for his theories of global suppression by elites, but also for his very public divorce and removal from social media in late 2018. Some of his stories have led to dangerous (the infamous Pizzagate story; Yuhas, 2017) and deadly (the attempted assassination of U.S. Arizona Representative Gabrielle Giffords and murder of six people; (*America's Lethal Politics*, 2017; Zaitchick, 2011) events in which a few viewers, much like a few War of the Worlds listeners did in 1938, took false information to extremes.

PSRs, one could argue, are vulnerable to heavy influence by these factors. Considering the cases in which Jones' conspiracy theories clearly led to violence, we must examine PSRs and their attributes, as such an examination may transcend intellectual curiosity and have implications for public safety in our media-rich landscape. While both the II and PSR literature provides bases for hypotheses regarding the frequency, self-dominance, and valence with other mediated personae, we are left with questions about the relationships among viewing, perceived credibility, and PSR as pertains to "fake news" announcers. The following research questions and hypotheses are designed to shed light on PSRs with Alex Jones and how PSRs may be related to credibility and viewing.

RQ1: Which attributes of PSRs with Alex Jones predict perceived credibility of *Infowars*?

H1: Frequency of IIs in a PSR will not predict credibility of *Infowars*.

RQ2: Which attributes of PSRs with Alex Jones predict heavier viewing of *Infowars*?

H2a-c: Frequent (a), Self-dominant (b), positive-valence (c) PSRs with Alex Jones will predict heavier viewing of *Infowars*.

RQ3: What role does PSR specificity play in viewing *Infowars*?

## METHODS

### Participants

Following IRB approval from a prominent southern university in the United States, we used Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) to collect our data sample by programming an online survey into Google Forms. Before beginning the survey, participants read a consent form which indicated that they must be at least 18 years old to complete the survey. Participants were compensated with a 5-cent Amazon credit for completing the survey and did so by entering a code back into MTurk. Participants were informed that they were free to drop out of the study at any point with no penalty to themselves or the researchers. Quite ironically, the participants had to fulfill the following qualification before beginning: "Workers must speak, read, listen to, and write fluent English." Participants also had to be at least aware of either Alex Jones or *Infowars*.

Out of 581 total MTurk respondents, there were slightly more men (n = 294) than women (n = 287), a 50.3% versus 49.2% split. Most respondents, 46%, reported typically voting for Democrats (n = 270), 30% typically voted for Republicans (172), 12% usually voted for Libertarian candidates (n = 70), 5% typically voted for either Green or Socialist candidates (n = 30), those who usually voted for independents made up 4% (n = 24), approximately 2% of respondents indicated that they typically did not vote (n = 15), and finally, .5% indicated that they usually voted for "others" (n = 3). Nearly 40% of respondents (n = 231) earn $30,000 or less each year; 15% earn between $30,000 and $45,000 yearly (n = 87), 16% make between $45,000 and $60,000 each year (n = 92), 11% earn $60,000-$75,000 yearly (n

= 64), 8% of respondents earn between $75,000 and $90,000 a year (n = 48), and 11% earn over $90,000 annually (n = 62).

Most participants were white (N = 354; 61%), but 21% were Asian (n = 124), 7% indicated they were Hispanic (n = 42), 5% were Black (n = 27), 3% indicated that they were mixed (n = 18), 1% were American Indian or Alaska Native (n = 7), and 2% reported "other" (n = 12). In regard to education, 3% of respondents had terminal degrees (n = 15), 18% had either a master's degree or another advanced certification (n = 103), 41% obtained bachelor's degrees (n = 241), 28% indicated that they had completed some college (n = 166), 8% attained high school diplomas (n = 49), and only 2% had elementary or middle school educations (n = 10). The average age of respondents was 34.6 years old (*SD* = 11.14).

**Procedure**

We developed a survey in Google Forms to measure respondents' viewership of *Infowars*, perceptions of Alex Jones' credibility, PSRs with Jones, the integration of social media use in daily life, political ideology and other basic demographics. The survey was distributed through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and respondents received five cents of Amazon credit per completed survey. The data was exported from Google Forms to a CSV file which was loaded into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis. The questions assessed a variety of factors including perceived credibility of Alex Jones/*Infowars*, parasocial functions and characteristics, and basic demographics.

**Measures**

To screen respondents, we required participants to recognize Alex Jones whether they viewed his show *Infowars* or not. Due to extensive traditional media coverage of Jones, his public divorce, and child custody battles, not to mention his other antics, and even his public endorsement by President Trump, Jones has been a recurring figure in the mainstream media.

**Viewing Frequency.** First, we asked how frequently viewers watch Alex Jones/*Infowars*. Possible responses included "never," "a few times per year," "a few times per month," "weekly," and "daily." This allowed us to identify the heavier viewers and/or greater fans, as well as those who may have had a degree of familiarity with the man/show, but who indicated they did not watch *Infowars*.

**Credibility.** To assess perceptions of *Infowars* credibility, we used Meyer's (1988) Newspaper Credibility Index as derived from Gaziano and McGrath's (1986) News Credibility Scale and contextualized it 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. Items included "Alex Jones/*Infowars* is inaccurate" and "Alex Jones/*Infowars* is biased." During data analysis, we reverse-coded responses so that higher scores would reflect greater perceptions of credibility.

**Attributes of Parasocial Relationships**. We measured attributes of parasocial relationships with Alex Jones using abbreviated versions of Madison and Porter's (2015, 2016) PSR characteristics scales. Unlike many measures of parasocial interaction and relationships (e.g. Rubin, et al., 1985), these measures tap into the everyday attributes and functions of people's relationships with a mediated persona. Madison and Porter (2016) with the exception of self-dominance (Cronbach's alpha = .76) reported acceptable reliability coefficients (greater than .83) for all attribute scales. The top-two loading items from Madison & Porter's (2016) factor analyses comprised each attribute dimension in the present study. We measured responses 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 the frequency characteristic includes "I

imagine myself interacting with Alex Jones many times throughout a typical day;" an example from the valence attribute includes "My imagined conversations with Alex Jones are usually enjoyable."

**Demographics.** Respondents were also asked to provide conventional demographic information including age, household income, ethnicity, education level, and gender. Respondents indicated their age through a dropdown menu that asked them to select the "age they turned on their last birthday." We measured household income with a seven-point scale that began with "$0-$15,000 per year" and increased in increments of $15,000 up to "90,000+ per year." Standard ethnic categories such as "White," "African American," and "Asian" were used to measure ethnicity. To analyze ethnicity, we re-coded race into a dummy variable which indicated either "white" or not. To measure education level, we used a 7-point scale which ranged from "Elementary School Grades K-5 up to "Terminal degree (Ph.D., Ed.D., CFRE, MFA, etc.)." Finally, respondents indicated their gender as either "Male" or "Female," which we coded as a 0/1 dummy variable for analysis.

**Results**

In this section we report the results of this study beginning with the scale properties and moving through the research questions and hypotheses. Cronbach's alphas for all scales in this study indicate good reliability. *Table 1: Scale Properties* shows the means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alphas of the scales used in this study.

Table 1:
*Scale Properties* (N = 580)

| | #Items | N | M | SD | Alpha |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Credibility | 7 | 580 | 2.57 | 1.09 | .96 |
| Characteristics | | | | | |
| Frequency | 2 | 580 | 0.65 | 1.04 | .94 |
| Variety | 2 | 580 | 0.76 | 1.13 | .92 |
| Valence | 2 | 580 | 0.86 | 1.11 | .84 |
| Specificity | 2 | 580 | 0.80 | 1.14 | .90 |
| Self-Dominance | 2 | 580 | 0.75 | 1.09 | .85 |

RQ1 asked, "Which attributes of PSRs with Alex Jones predict perceived credibility of *Infowars*?" Hierarchical regression revealed variety ($\beta = -.25$, $p < .05$) in PSRs negatively predicted perception of credibility while specificity ($\beta = .51$, $p < .01$) significantly predicted perceived credibility. Valence also emerged as a significant predictor ($\beta = .15$, $p = .09$) while self-dominance ($\beta = -.15$, $p = .09$ ) emerged as a marginally significant negative predictor of credibility; $F(5, 580) = 17.15$, $R^2 = .12$, $p < .01$. Frequency ($\beta = .01$, $p = N.S.$) failed to predict credibility, lending support for H1, for which we rejected the null.

When adding demographic factors in to the model, a similar pattern emerged. Variety ($\beta = -.24$, $p < .05$) in PSRs negatively predicted perception of credibility while specificity ($\beta = .51$, $p < .01$) emerged as a positive predictor of perceived credibility. Valence emerged as a significant predictor ($\beta = .17$, $p = .05$) while self-dominance ($\beta = -.15$, $p = .08$ ) emerged as a marginally significant negative predictor of credibility; $F(10, 580) = 10.36$, $R^2 = .15$, $p < .01$.

Finally, one demographic variable significantly predicted credibility: being of a race other than white (β = -.11, $p < .01$ ). Level of education (β = -.07, $p = .07$) became a marginally negative predictor when adding demographics to the model. *Table 2: Linear Regression of PSR Attributes on Perceived Credibility* indicates the effects of attributes of PSR on perceived credibility while controlling for the effects of demographic variables.

Table 2:
*Linear Regression of PSR Attributes on Perceived Credibility*

| | +Model 1 | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | B | SE(B) | β | *t* | Sig.(*p*) |
| Attributes | | | | | |
| Frequency | 0.00 | 0.10 | 0.00 | 0.04 | .97 |
| Variety | -0.24 | 0.10 | -0.25 | -2.44 | .02* |
| Valence | 0.15 | 0.09 | 0.15 | 1.71 | .09 |
| Specificity ` | 0.51 | 0.09 | 0.53 | 5.38 | .00** |
| Self-Dominance | -0.15 | 0.09 | -0.15 | -1.72 | .09 |

| | ++Model 2 | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | B | SE(B) | β | *t* | Sig.(*p*) |
| Attributes | | | | | |
| Frequency | -0.01 | 0.10 | -0.01 | -0.06 | .95 |
| Variety | -0.24 | 0.10 | -0.25 | -2.43 | .02* |
| Valence | 0.17 | 0.09 | 0.17 | 1.88 | .05* |
| Specificity ` | 0.49 | 0.09 | 0.51 | 5.20 | .00** |
| Self-Dominance | -0.16 | 0.09 | -0.16 | -1.78 | .08 |
| Demographics | | | | | |
| Race/Ethnicity (White/Not) | -0.25 | 0.10 | 0.113 | -2.57 | .01* |
| Income | -0.01 | 0.02 | -0.01 | -0.28 | .78 |
| Gender | -0.14 | 0.09 | -0.07 | 1.65 | .10 |
| Age | 0.01 | 0.00 | -0.06 | 1.67 | .17 |
| Education | -0.08 | 0.04 | -0.07 | -1.81 | .07 |

+$R^2$ = .13; ++$R^2$ = .15 ; +++*F*-change = 7.20 ; *$p < .05$, **p < .01

RQ2 asked, "Which attributes of PSRs with Alex Jones predict *Infowars* viewing?" To help answer this question, we hypothesized that "H1: a) Frequent, b) self-dominant, and c) positive valence PSRs with Alex Jones will predict heavier viewing of *Infowars*."

Hierarchical regression revealed the PSR frequency attribute (β = -.03, $p$ = *N.S.*) did not predict frequency of viewing, the PSR self-dominance attribute (β = .-.12, $p$ = *N.S.*) did not significantly predict frequency of viewing, but the PSR valence attribute (β = .22, $p < .05$) significantly predicted frequency of viewing *Infowars*; $F(5, 580) = 33.63$, $R^2 = .23$, $p < .05$.

Although we did not hypothesize the roles of the variety and specificity characteristics of PSR in viewing frequency, we included them in our model in the tradition of previous II and PSR research.

While variety did not predict frequency of viewing *Infowars* ($\beta = .06$, $p = N.S.$), specificity emerged as a strong predictor of viewing frequency ($\beta = .34$, $p < .01$.); $F(5, 580) = 33.63$, $R^2 = .23$, $p < .05$.

The significant effect of the valence attribute ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < .05$) remained after creating a second model that controlled for the possible effects of demographics. The self dominance attribute ($\beta = -0.14$, $p = .09$) approached significance as a negative predictor in the second model while the specificity attribute of PSR remained a strong predictor ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < .01$). Level of education ($\beta = -0.10$, $p < .05$) again emerged as a negative predictor of viewing *Infowars*, being male ($\beta = 0.10$, $p < .05$) emerged as a positive predictor, and age ($\beta = 0.08$, $p = .052$) as a marginally significant and positive predictor; $F(10, 580) = 18.72$, $R^2 = .25$, $p < .01$.

Therefore, for H2a and H2b we failed to reject the nulls. We found support for H2c, with the specificity attribute of PSRs emerging as a surprise predictor. See *Table 3: Linear Regression of Functions on* Infowars *Viewing*. *Table 3: Linear Regression of PSR Attributes on* Infowars *Viewing* indicates the effects of attributes of PSR while controlling for the effects of demographic variables on *Infowars* viewing.

Table 3:
*Linear Regression of PSR Attributes on Infowars Viewing*

| | +Model 1 | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | B | SE(B) | β | *t* | Sig.(*p*) |
| Characteristics | | | | | |
| Frequency | -0.03 | 0.09 | -0.03 | -0.33 | .74 |
| Variety | 0.05 | 0.09 | 0.06 | 0.64 | .52 |
| Valence | 0.20 | 0.08 | 0.22 | 2.61 | .01** |
| Specificity | 0.30 | 0.08 | 0.34 | 3.71 | .00** |
| Self Dominance | -0.11 | 0.08 | -0.12 | -1.45 | .15 |

| | ++Model 2 | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | B | SE(B) | β | *t* | Sig.(*p*) |
| Characteristics | | | | | |
| Frequency | -0.03 | 0.09 | -0.03 | -0.31 | .76 |
| Variety | 0.08 | 0.09 | 0.09 | 0.91 | .37 |
| Valence | 0.18 | 0.08 | 0.21 | 2.44 | .02* |
| Specificity ` | 0.30 | 0.08 | 0.33 | 3.70 | .00** |
| Self-Dominance | -0.13 | 0.08 | -0.14 | -1.69 | .10 |
| Demographics | | | | | |
| Race/Ethnicity (White/Not) | -0.03 | 0.09 | -0.01 | -0.35 | .73 |
| Income | 0.00 | 0.02 | 0.00 | 0.06 | .95 |
| Gender | 0.20 | 0.08 | 0.10 | 2.63 | .01** |
| Age | 0.01 | 0.00 | 0.08 | -2.05 | .04* |
| Education | -0.08 | 0.04 | -0.09 | -2.33 | .02* |

+Adjusted $R^2 = .23$ ; ++ Adjusted $R^2 = .25$ ; +++*F*-change = 14.92 ; *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$

RQ3 asked "What role does PSR specificity play in viewing *Infowars*?" Specificity emerged as a positive predictor ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < .01$) of viewing *Infowars*, even when controlling for demographics ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < .01$). Specificity in PSRs appears to play a significant role in predicting viewing of *Infowars*. In the following section we explore the meaning of the findings in this study.

## DISCUSSION

This study explored parasocial relationships with conspiracy theorist Alex Jones of the show *Infowars*. While providing exciting findings that help build our understanding of the attributes of parasocial relationships, this also reveals a good deal about audience relationships with fake and biased news.

First, this study found that variety in the people, places, and things imagined in PSRs with Alex Jones negatively predicts perceived credibility. This likely reflects a broader worldview and real or parasocial experiences with personae espousing countering viewpoints. The more exposure to other voices a person may have had or currently has may minimize the perceived credibility of *Infowars* or allow the viewer to at least consider factors beyond those promoted by *Infowars*. *Infowars* also relies on a limited diversity of content, focusing more on Alex Jones at his desk or "man-on-the-street" interviews scripted to influence people holding uncrystallized opinions on various issues pushed in the *Infowars* information ecosystem. Moreover, and borrowing from II theory, PSRs allow people to make attributions about people or scenarios (e.g., Bodie, Burleson, Holmstrom, McCullough, Rack, Hanasono, & Rosier (2011). Assessing credibility is related to attribution, and its assessment involves other attributes of PSR or real-life experiences.

Second, and not to be confused with variety, the specificity attribute of PSR reflects the details of an imagined scenario in a PSR and may include visualizing clothing worn by participants, specifics of dialog, facial gestures, and other sensory information such as smells or background sounds. Our data show that greater specificity in an imagined PSR sequence predicts both greater perceived credibility and viewing. Zagacki, Edwards, and Honeycutt (1992) found a limited association of specificity in imagined interaction and emotion (positive, negative, and mixed). Credibility may be more of a cognitive trait than an emotional trait; therefore specificity in PSRs With Alex Jones may play a role in cognition that is less attached to emotion and more attached to facts, "facts," or cues.

Anecdotal evidence, however, suggests that specificity and positive valence may be tied in with some of his oft-repeated catchphrases -- "They're turning the frogs gay!" "Child sex colonies on Mars!" "There's a war on for your mind!" -- all of which are generally delivered with a certain level of aggression, may provide a high level of details. Furthermore, their absurdity may create a positive valence in a PSR, which may lead to a viewer to search for a "kick" through the latest *Infowars* videos.

Third, we found that two attributes (self-dominance and valence) of PSR emerged as marginal predictors of *Infowars*' credibility, although self dominance was a marginally significant negative predictor and valence only emerged as a significant positive predictor of perceived credibility in our second model, which controlled for demographic influences. The self-dominance attribute as a negative predictor is of particular interest and, in general, counters the assertion that Americans are more self-dominant in their IIs (McCann & Honeycutt, 2006). For the most part, the more we are self-dominant in our PSRs with Alex Jones the less credible we find him to be.

The correlational nature of our data clearly makes this a problematic finding (in addition to being a marginal one); Do we judge Alex Jones to be incredible and therefore turn to a self-dominant stance in

our PSR imaginings with him? Do we imagine ourselves as self dominant in imagined conversation with him and therefore judge him to be incredible? Based on the finding regarding specificity, we lean toward arguing the former. Audiences with higher specificity in their PSRs may make credibility assessments based on cues delivered during an *Infowars* broadcast and use them in imagination work to bolster their own positions in imagined PSR conversation. A dominant and imaginary Alex Jones is not only "on-brand" with *Infowars*, but may serve a reinforcing function for existing beliefs and attitudes, regardless of what those may be (Madison et al., 2018). A passive Alex Jones could also be a source of cognitive dissonance in a PSR, and human beings tend to avoid such dissonance (Festinger, 1957), even if it is imaginary.Fourth, pleasant imagined interaction in PSRs with Alex Jones, which may largely fall in the eye of the beholder, predicted an increased sense of perceived credibility of Alex Jones among people of ethnicities other than Anglo/Caucasian. *Infowars* also decries the "global elites," which is a term he largely uses to describe powerful wealthy white people, and such a "them vs. us" theme against the powerful may resonate more with traditionally marginalized groups who may have less access to opportunity for economic and social advancement in the US. In classroom conditions, Goodboy, Bolkan, and Goldman (2015) found that positive-valenced IIs are associated with minimal dissent with instructors, which may parallel or suggest greater perceived credibility in association with positive-valence PSRs.

Finally, and as hypothesized, the frequency attribute failed to predict credibility. While PSRs with Alex Jones may lack the interpersonal "closeness" associated with other types of relationships (Bodie, Honeycutt, & Vickery, 2013; *see* Gleich, 1997), a person may not need to do a good deal of imaginative work to crystallize a judgment of credibility of a mediated partner in a PSR. In other words, perception of the credibility of a persona may form early-on in a PSR and remain consistent.

Among all the findings in this study, the self-dominance finding may be the most compelling. Tukachinsky and Stever (2018) argue that some people simply stop watching personae whom they despise, while others continue to watch and participate in online gossip around an unliked personae. The present study finds that the more self-dominant we are in our PSR with Alex Jones, the less credibility we attribute to him and his show *Infowars*. Our own deeply-held ideas of moral and intellectual superiority may lead us to believe mediated personae with whom we disagree are less credible, suggesting we may be less likely to believe them. On a society-wide scale this has the potential to promot echo chambers in which we become isolated and shut out from the marketplace of ideas. We feed our sense of moral superiority by exposing ourselves to consonant media messages (e.g., Cotton, 1985; Festinger, 1957), but dissonant messages (hatewatching) may feed it even more. These connected processes of bolstering our senses of superiority that occurs both during and after media consumption may convince us we are separate from the "bewildered herd," and has the potential to be detrimental to social cohesion. This places imaginative functions associated with media consumption at the forefront of many of the identified ills of modern media use: polarization, "red pilling," and more.

To summarize, positive valence and specificity of PSR were positive predictors of audience viewing. Enjoyable or happy PSRs with Alex Jones with a good deal of detail lead people to view *Infowars* more frequently. Self-dominance of PSR was a marginal negative predictor of viewing only when accounting for demographics, which suggest age, gender, and education influence self-dominance as a factor in not viewing *Infowars*. Some people, particularly younger, less-educated males, may prefer

feelings of self-dominance, leading to a negative valence in their PSRs with Alex Jones, and, therefore, watch *Infowars* less frequently than others.

**Limitations and Further Study**

This study is limited by the same issues many other surveys face: the data are correlational and cross-sectional, participation was through self-selection, and data are self-reported. Moreover, with focus on the attributes, the parasocial measures do not explore the actual content of participants' parasocial thinking. Future research should explore such content.

Because *Infowars* is a YouTube staple, many of the broadcasts (as well as clips, memes, parodies, remixes, and other Jones-inspired user-generated content) are shared via social media among users for whatever reasons they may have. Future research should explore social media use and its integration into the lives of Jones' adherents and proponents. Stever and Lawson (2013) rightly indicate that the one-sided nature of the traditional conceptualization of parasocial relationships is evolving into two-way communication with social media, as fans and celebrities now regularly communicate with one another through platforms such as Twitter. Each individual part of the larger process of a PSI sequence leading to ongoing PSR/IIs leading to outreach to celebrities via social media leading to two-way interaction has been covered in the extant literature, however the various sub-processes associated with intrapersonal communication remain new territory for research. PSR attributes and functions offer a solid framework for understanding the phenomenon of this process.

**Conclusion**

Between ad revenue-driven fake news, Russian-backed bots and social media pages, and current inflamed divisions in western civilization, we can no longer ignore the power of parasocial relationships, nor can we ignore the fact that various entities regularly harness them for commercial purposes, while some may even weaponize them. The findings in this study contribute to both our understanding of PSRs and shed light on human relationships with fake news and credibility through intrapersonal communication.

Researchers must continue to study the PSR functions and attributes in order to interpret the meaning of PSRs in everyday life. The present study reveals that frequency of imagined PSR sequences predicts neither perceived credibility nor viewing of Alex Jones; specificity predicts both perceived credibility and viewing of *Infowars*. Variety in PSR imaginative sequences predicts perceived credibility, and valence predicts viewing. Demographics, particularly age, education, and help predict the influence of these particular attributes of PSR on viewing, while race (and education to some extent) influences how valence, variety, and specificity predict perceived credibility.

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**Funding and Acknowledgements**

The authors declare no funding sources or conflicts of interest.

**About the Author(s)**

Phillip Madison grew up in west Texas and lives with his wife and children in Lafayette, Louisiana. His professional experience includes radio production and sales, fundraising management, and institutional advancement. He has taught undergraduate courses in Social Media, Social Media Strategies and Tactics, Media in Society, Strategic Media, Principles of Public Relations, PR Writing, PR Campaigns, PR Case Studies and Adobe CS5. He has taught graduate courses in PR Publics, PR Campaigns, and Data Analysis, while his general research interest is in media effects, focusing on parasocial relationships

Emily Covington graduated from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette with her Master of Science in Communication in December 2018. She was selected as the University's Outstanding Master's Graduate for the semester. As a graduate student, Emily co-author several journal articles and a book chapter and presented at multiple conferences. Her research interests include conflict management, political discourse, and imagined interactions. Emily currently works as the University of Louisiana at Lafayette's Assistant Director of Orientation."

Kaitlyn Wright was born and raised in Alexandria, LA. She graduated from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette (ULL) with a Bachelor of Arts in Communication with a specialization in public relations and is currently pursuing a Masters of Science in Communication with a specialization in advertising and public relations at ULL.

Timothy S. Gaspard is originally from Gretna, Louisiana. He moved to Lafayette, Louisiana, after graduating from Brother Martin High School in 2010. He earned his Bachlor of Arts degree in

Communication, with a major in public relations, from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette (ULL) in 2016. Currently, he is employed as a Graduate Assistant at ULL while pursuing a Master of Science degree in Communication. Specializations include public relations and human-machine communication.

**Online Connections**

(None Provided)