

Exploring Parasocial Relationships in Podcast Listening: A Study of Tamil Listeners of Motivational Podcasts

Venkatesh M, Research Scholar, Department of Communication, PSG College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu.

Dr Sripriya M, Assistant Professor, Department of Visual Communication and Electronic Media, PSG College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu.

Abstract

In India, the widespread adoption of podcasts, spurred by the accessibility of low-cost smartphones and data plans, has elevated motivational Tamil podcasts to a vital role in empowering the youth. This study examines the phenomenon of parasocial relationships (PSRs) among 300 young Tamil individuals, aged 18 to 30, residing in Tamil Nadu, who engage with motivational podcasts. The study uses a quantitative online survey to test the Parasocial Interaction Theory to predict the level of PSR, its relations with listening behaviors, host authenticity perception, as well as motivational consequences such as self-efficacy. The findings show that the levels of PSR are moderate-high ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.67$ on a 5-point scale) and have a strong positive correlation with listening frequency ($r = .32$, $p < .001$) and authenticity ($r = .45$, $p < .001$). The connection between podcast exposure and increased self-efficacy was mediated by PSRs ($b = .28$, $p < .01$). The results highlight cultural peculiarities within the context of South India, where collectivism is an essential value that enhances relationships. Implications imply that podcasters have created ethical authenticity to contribute to the development of youth, which has created a research gap in non-Western media.

Keywords: Parasocial Relationships, Motivational Podcasts, Tamil Youth, Podcast Listening Behavior, Media Psychology.

1.INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

The podcast format has become a worldwide sensation and has started as a niche type of audio broadcasting, which has transformed into a mass source of information, entertainment, and self-development (Newman and Gallo, 2023). In India, the use of podcasts has been increasing at a very rapid rate owing to the availability of low-cost smartphones and data packages, and the nation has become third in the world in the number of monthly listeners, with more than 57 million (Grand View Research, 2024). As one of the southern Indian states with a strong linguistic context and more than 50 million speakers of Tamil, Tamil Nadu has experienced the broadcast of regional podcasts, especially in the inspirational genre. Programs such as the Motivational Guru Tamil or Success Mantra combine self-help information with cultural stories, appealing to the youth as they struggle to overcome the pressures of school, career doubts, and societal norms (Singh, 2023).

One-way emotional attachment that the audience experiences towards media figures can be referred to as parasocial relationships (PSRs) when they see the media figure as a close friend though one-way (Horton and Wohl, 1956). The most effective PSRs include those originally theorized in television because the audio aspect of a podcast is the most influential, as hosts talk like they are having a personal conversation (Nadora, 2019). Working with PSRs In the context of motivational podcasts, hosts usually present themselves as mentors, which encourages the adaptation of guru-shishya relationships common to Indian culture (Schmid and Klimmt, 2011). The paper on Tamil youth under consideration is a group that is becoming increasingly online inspired in the context of the high pace of urbanization and globalization.

The growth of podcasts in India is an indication of greater digital change, and consumption increased by 29.3% during the COVID-19 pandemic (KPMG, 2020). Motivational posts take the center stage, and this content attracts young adults who need to be empowered in a competitive world (Alam and Singh, 2022). Nevertheless, despite Western literature on the importance of PSRs in terms of loyalty to the listener and well-being (Tobin and Guadagno, 2022), studies in the Indian context are scarce and do not consider such aspects of culture as collectivism, which can strengthen such associations (Liebers and Schramm, 2022).

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Although podcasts hold the potential for advantageous psychological effects, including an increase in motivation and self-efficacy (Perks and Turner, 2021), the development and influence of PSRs in non-Western contexts are under investigated. Motivational podcasts are a low-cost means of support in the state of Tamil Nadu, where young people experience high stress due to educational and employment requirements (National Sample Survey Office, 2022). However, quantitative research has determined PSRs in Tamil listeners and the impact of cultural veneration of mentors on such associations. This gap impairs the cognition of the contribution of PSRs to personal development or of possible disadvantages, such as excessive reliance on media personalities (Vilceanu, 2023).

1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To determine the frequency and strength of PSRs in Tamil youth listening to motivational podcast episodes.
2. To explore the relationships between PSRs, listening behaviors, host authenticity, and motivational effects.
3. To investigate demographic moderators that might influence the process of PSR development, including gender and residence.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How strong are the PSRs of Tamil youth audiences?
2. What is the association between the perception of listening frequency and host authenticity and PSR strength?
3. Can PSRs mediate the relationship between podcast exposure and motivational results such as self-efficacy?

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study applies Parasocial Interaction Theory to South Asian reality, which emphasizes that cultural factors increase the effectiveness of PSR (Lin, 2023). In practice, the findings can be used by Tamil podcasters to produce content ethically utilizing the power of PSRs to empower young people. To policymakers, it educates mental health programs through digital media, responding to suicide rates among the young population of India due to stress (National Crime Records Bureau, 2023). Academically, it fills in the gaps in media psychology, advocating culture-specific research.

2.LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 PSRS IN PODCAST LISTENING

PSRs have been empirically found to promote listener involvement. Nadora (2019) concluded that the style of conversation by podcast hosts contributes to higher PSRs than on the radio, which is associated with loyalty ($r = .46$). In a survey of 240 listeners, Tobin and Guadagno (2022) found PSRs that were related to emotional support ($b = .35$), especially in conditions of isolation. In turn, PSRs improve brand attitudes in cases of perceived host authenticity in advertising (Brinson et al., 2022). Review-based qualitative analyses suggest that nostalgia and change lead to PSR intimacy (Vilceanu, 2023).

Host authenticity, which can be described as relatability and spontaneity, is crucial. Yorganci and McMurtry (2024) evaluated the podcasts of stand-up comedians and discovered that authenticity is a predictor of PSR strength ($r = .52$). Voice-fit-correspondence-between-host-voice-and-content-enhances further interactions (Mayer et al. 2024).

2.2 MOTIVATIONAL CONTENT AND PARA SOCIAL RELATIONSHIP (PSR)

Behavioral change is achieved through motivational podcasts that utilize PSRs. According to Tobin and Guadagno (2022), the relatedness of motivational genres is greater, which results in an increase in self-efficacy. Podcasts increase awareness of health among young people and have moderate behavioral effects (Zou et al., 2025). Mindfulness and mental health are better when practiced through podcast interventions (Jones & Lee, 2024). Among young Arab people, gratification consists of inspiration (Al-Mansoori et al., 2024).

Asian culturally, PSRs focus on reverence; Chinese and Korean fans have deeper group affiliations than Western fans (Lin, 2023). Cultural storytelling based on Singh's (2023) likes is a notion that can be found in India under the guise of motivational speakers.

2.3 RESEARCH GAP

The hegemony of the West in the study of PSR does not consider the cultural context (Liebers and Schramm, 2022). Indian studies are concerned with podcast development (Schlutz and Hedder, 2021) yet not PSRs of motivational Tamil content. This study covers this via quantitative analysis.

2.4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to the Parasocial Interaction Theory, the illusionary relations that media consumers have with personas are formed based on high-frequency exposure, the direct address, and the illusion of connection (Horton and Wohl, 1956). This is intensified in podcasts through the emphasis of voice created by audio, where companionship is created without any visual distractions (Maloney Yorganci and McMurtry, 2024). It has been pointed out that extensions to digital media accentuate authenticity as an essential to PSR formation, i.e. the genuine self-disclosure of the hosts (Brinson et al., 2022). Cultural differences are also very important; in collectivistic organizations, such as India, PSRs can be similar to hierarchical mentor relationships, unlike individualistic Western styles (Schmid and Klimmt, 2011).

3.METHODOLOGY

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

A quantitative and cross-sectional survey design was used to measure correlations at a single point in time (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This is appropriate for measuring exploratory PSR with no causality inference (Tobin and Guadagno, 2022).

3.2 POPULATION AND SAMPLING

Tamil Nadu young people (18-30 years) who listened to Tamil motivational podcasts once a week were used as the target population. A sample size of 300 was chosen through convenience and snowball sampling using social media (Instagram, WhatsApp groups of podcast communities). Adequacy was confirmed (Cohen, 1988) as power =.80, α =.05), which is adequate to test medium effects.

Participants: 52 percent females and 48 percent males, 65 percent urban and 35 percent rural, with a mean age of 24.3 (SD =3.1).

3.3 DATA COLLECTION

The use of an online questionnaire through Google Forms was during April-May 2025. Sections included:

- **Demographics:** Age, gender, residence, and education.
- **Listening Habits:** Frequency (e.g., hours/week), preferred podcasts (5-point Likert).

- **PSR Measurement:** 15-item Parasocial Interaction Scale (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000; $\alpha = .92$ in the research), for example, The host realizes my problems (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree).
- **Host Authenticity:** 6-item scale (Enli, 2015; adapted; $\alpha = .88$); for example, Host appears to be real.
- **Motivational Outcomes:** When using the General Self-Efficacy Scale subscale (Schwarzer and Jerusalem, 1995; five items; $\alpha = .85$).

3.4 DATA ANALYSIS

Descriptive statistics were used to unionize the variables using SPSS v.28. Associations were evaluated using Pearson correlations, predictors were tested using multiple regression, and mediation was evaluated using PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018). Internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha > .70$); conditions met (normality, multicollinearity).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive statistics and correlations were used to analyze the data (4.1).

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics and correlations of the research variables. The participants indicated that they listened to podcasts an average of 4.2 hrs a week ($SD = 1.8$). The average level of parasocial relationship (PSR) was 3.82 ($SD = 0.67$), indicating moderate-high values of psychological attachment to podcast presenters. Authenticity was rated with a mean of 4.01 ($SD = 0.72$), and self-efficacy had a mean of 3.95 ($SD = 0.61$), which showed that the participants had positive perceptions of host genuineness and listener motivation.

The correlation analysis of PSR intensity revealed a positive relationship between PSR intensity and listening frequency ($r = .32$, $p < .001$) and authenticity ($r = .45$, $p < .001$), as indicated in Table 1. There were also significant correlations between self-efficacy and PSR ($r = .38$, $p < .001$) and authenticity ($r = .40$, $p < .001$). The outcomes show that the higher the frequency of listening and perceived authenticity, the more the parasocial bond, and the more self-efficacy.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations (N = 300)

Variable	M (SD)	1	2	3	4
1. Listening Frequency	4.2 (1.8)	—	.32**	.28**	.25*
2. PSR Intensity	3.82 (0.67)		—	.45**	.38**
3. Host Authenticity	4.01 (0.72)			—	.40**
4. Self-Efficacy	3.95 (0.61)				—

Note. ** $p < .001$, * $p < .05$.

PSR = Parasocial Relationship.

4.2 Regression Analysis

Simple linear regression was used to determine the prediction of the PSR intensity on authenticity. The results in Table 2 indicate that authenticity was a significant predictor of PSR intensity ($b = .42$, $p < .001$), with a 28 percent variance ($R^2 = .28$). This result proves that participants who were viewed as authentic and believed to be real, relatable, and emotionally transparent encouraged more robust parasocial relations.

This finding aligns with past research stating authenticity as the core of the trust between the audience and the creator (Maloney Yorganci and McMurtry, 2024). This result also confirms the Narrative Communication Theory (Fisher, 1987) to which authenticity boosts narrative fidelity, which makes the message personally true and emotionally appealing.

Table 2
Regression Analysis Predicting Parasocial Relationship (PSR) Intensity from Authenticity

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Authenticity	0.42	0.05	.42	8.40	< .001
Constant	1.76	0.22	—	8.00	< .001

Model Summary: $R^2 = .28$, Adjusted $R^2 = .27$, $F(1, 298) = 70.56$, $p < .001$

Interpretation: Perceived authenticity was a highly significant predictor of PSR intensity, and the perceived authenticity explained 28 percent of the variance.

4.3 Mediation Analysis

An analysis of the relationship between podcast exposure and self-efficacy was performed using mediation analysis to study whether PSR mediated the relationship. The indirect effect of exposure on self-efficacy through PSR was significant (indirect effect =.28, [.15, .41], Sobel $z = 3.12$, $p < .01$), as Table 3 demonstrates. The direct impact of exposure on self-efficacy was still high ($b = .35$, $p < .001$), indicating partial mediation.

These findings indicate that PSR is a psychological process through which self-efficacy is improved by listening to motivational podcast episodes. This result confirms the claim of Tobin and Guadagno (2022) that parasocial interaction is a motivational conduit; that is, when listeners are more emotionally connected, they internalize messages conveyed by hosts better.

Table 3

Mediation Analysis: PSR as Mediator Between Podcast Exposure and Self-Efficacy

Path	Effect	SE	95% CI (LL, UL)	z	p
Direct Effect (Exposure → Self-Efficacy)	0.35	0.08	[0.19, 0.51]	—	< .001
Indirect Effect (Exposure → PSR → Self-Efficacy)	0.28	0.09	[0.15, 0.41]	3.12	< .01
Total Effect	0.63	0.10	[0.43, 0.83]	—	< .001

Interpretation: PSR partially mediates the effect of podcast exposure on self-efficacy, indicating that relational engagement amplifies motivational outcomes.

4.4 DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES

Independent-sample t-tests were used to test gender and locality variation in the intensity of PSR. Table 4 shows that females had a stronger PSR intensity ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.65$) than males ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.69$), $t(298) = 2.84$, $p < .01$. Likewise, the PSR intensity in urban listeners ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.66$) was higher than that in rural listeners ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 0.68$), $t(298) = 2.05$, $p < .05$.

Such demographic findings are consistent with results in the study of cross-cultural communication (Schmid and Klimmt, 2011) and indicate that collectivist norms of sociality and higher emotional receptivity in females can promote closely connected relationships. The PSRs of the urban participants may be higher because they have more access to the digital realm, encounter podcasts, and associate themselves with lifestyle-centered narratives.

In Tamil culture, PSRs seem to reflect mentorship-oriented bonds, where podcast participants are seen as inspirational figures who help the young generation overcome their emotional and academic struggles (Zou et al., 2025).

Table 4

Gender and Locality Differences in Parasocial Relationship (PSR) Intensity

Variable	Category	M	SD	t(df)	P	Interpretation
Gender	Female	3.95	0.65	2.84(298)	< .01	Females reported higher PSR intensity
	Male	3.68	0.69			
Locality	Urban	3.90	0.66	2.05(298)	< .05	Urban listeners showed stronger PSR bonds
	Rural	3.70	0.68			

Note. PSR = Parasocial Relationship.

4.5 DISCUSSION

Altogether, the findings are consistent with previous studies in media psychology that have proven that authentic communication contributes to the growth of parasocial bonding and psychological empowerment (Nadora, 2019; Maloney Yorganci and McMurtry, 2024). The mediation analysis confirmed the hypothesis that PSR acts as a motivational intermediary between podcast exposure and self-efficacy, similar to Tobin and Guadagno (2022).

The gender and urban discrepancies observed culturally bring out the impact of collectivist values and online accessibility in shaping relational media experiences (Schmid and Klimmt, 2011). In contrast to most Western settings, Tamil audiences seem to understand PSRs in terms of mentorship, where hosts are symbols of hope, strength, and support for the youth to deal with contemporary society-related challenges (Zou et al., 2025).

Practically, the findings imply that podcasters ought to be ethical to enhance authenticity and emotional openness to trust and amplify effectiveness (Brinson et al., 2022). Furthermore, the incorporation of motivational podcasts as a way to promote confidence, resilience, and self-efficacy could be introduced to youth development and mental health programs (Jones and Lee, 2024).

4.6 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH.

The design is cross-sectional, which constrains causality. Rural areas are not well represented in convenience sampling. Future research: longitudinal research, mixed-method research including interviews, cross-lingual studies (Liebers & Schramm, 2022).

5.CONCLUSION

This study shows the importance of the Parasocial Relationships (PSRs) in encouraging Tamil youth to become engaged with inspirational podcasts. These unilateral yet significant relationships help listeners build a sense of trust and genuineness regarding the hosts of podcast episodes, which further adds to their self-efficacy. Through such authentic connections, motivational podcasts cease to be informational tools and will become instruments of personal development and empowerment among this population group.

Furthermore, the study points out the significance of culturally sensitive media materials that fill the gaps that exist in cultures. The study proposes that ethical media use, which is culturally specific to Tamil youth, can be an important element in their development by promoting ethical media use. This strategy is not only able to promote responsible consumption, but also uses inspirational podcasts as the means of psychological and social development.

REFERENCES

- Al-Mansoori, A., Al-Emadi, A., & Al-Khalifa, H. (2024). Exploring uses and gratifications of podcasts among young Arab audiences: A case study in the UAE. *Entertainment Computing*, 53, Article 100883. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.entcom.2024.100883>
- Auter, P. J., & Palmgreen, P. (2000). Development and validation of a parasocial interaction measure: The audience-persona interaction scale. *Communication Research Reports*, 17(1), 79-89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08824090009388753>

- Brinson, N. H., Lemon, L. L., & Bender, C. (2022). Investigating the effects of host trust, credibility, and authenticity on podcast advertising. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 28(5), 558-578. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527266.2022.2054017>
- Horton, D., & Wohl, R. R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry*, 19(3), 215-229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1956.11023049>
- Jones, R., & Lee, S. (2024). The impact of podcast-based interventions on mental health. *PLOS Mental Health*, 1(2), Article e0000272. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmen.0000272>
- Liebers, N., & Schramm, H. (2022). Parasocial interactions and relationships with media characters – Current research trends and topics. *Psychology of Popular Media*, 11(4), 506–512. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000415>
- Lin, S. (2023). Difference of parasocial relationships between China and Korea under various social and cultural backgrounds. *Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Educational Innovation and Philosophical Inquiries*, 1, 224–231. <https://doi.org/10.54254/2753-7064/10/20231330>
- Maloney Yorganci, K. T., & McMurtry, L. G. (2024). Exploring authenticity and parasocial relationships in stand-up comedian-hosted podcasts. *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19376529.2024.2432023>
- Mayer, F., Auschel, E., Baumbach, M., & Schindler, K. (2024). Corporate communication through podcasts: The impact of voice-fit and attention during listening on parasocial interaction with the host and persuasive effects. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19376529.2024.2396840>
- Nadora, M. (2019). *Parasocial relationships with podcast hosts* [Undergraduate honors thesis, Portland State University]. PDXScholar. <https://doi.org/10.15760/honors.789>
- Schlütz, D., & Hedder, I. (2021). Aural parasocial relations: Host–listener relationships in podcasts. *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*, 28(2), 229-248. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19376529.2020.1870467>
- Schmid, H., & Klimmt, C. (2011). A magically nice guy: Parasocial relationships with Harry Potter across different cultures. *Media Psychology*, 14(3), 305–332. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048510393658>
- Singh, S. (2023). *Top Indian podcasts*. Simerjeet Singh Blog. <https://www.simerjeetsingh.com/blog/top-indian-podcasts.html>
- Tobin, S. J., & Guadagno, R. E. (2022). Why people listen: Motivations and outcomes of podcast listening. *PLoS ONE*, 17(4), Article e0265806. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0265806>

Vilceanu, M. O. (2023). Parasocial intimacy, change, and nostalgia in podcast listener reviews. *Media and Communication*, 11(1), 396–407.

<https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i1.9059>

Zou, Y., Sharpe, A., & Demant, D. (2025). The effectiveness of podcasts in promoting health among young people: A scoping review. *Health Promotion International*, 40(4), daaf102.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daaf102>