Research Proposal: Transitioning from Parasocial to

Social Relationships in Seventh-day Adventist Evangelism

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I have an ownership stake in the commercial enterprise described in this paper that offers evangelism marketing and YouTube advertising services to churches.

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Abstract

In the post-Covid-19 era, people are more isolated than ever, making it even more difficult for pastors and evangelists to establish redemptive relationships with people in the community. The development of parasocial relationships through digital video advertising is proposed as an evangelistic path to reach people where they are. Once established, these parasocial relationships can be leveraged to engage these people in person, leading the relationship to transition to a social one based on two-way communication, which in the context of evangelism is a proven method to help someone embrace religious belief and join a spiritual community of faith. If this methodology is successful, it could unlock new evangelistic channels. It also has the potential to expand parasocial relationship theory to better understand the mechanics leading to a transition from parasocial to social relationship.

Keywords: parasocial relationships, Seventh-day Adventist evangelism, YouTube advertising

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Parasocial relationships have received significant scholarly attention over the last decade, as studies have looked at the growth of social media influencers and the methods they use to foster parasocial relationships, as well as the impact of these illusory relationships on consumer marketing. Parasocial relationships have also been found to reduce prejudice and social anxiety. However, this research has primarily focused on developing these parasocial relationships and leveraging them for influence marketing or broader societal change. There has been scant research on the transition from a one-sided parasocial relationship developed through media channels to an in-person, face-to-face social relationship.

Seventh-day Adventist pastors and evangelists have a desire to build relationships with people in the community for evangelistic purposes. However, a significant barrier to this is the distrust people have when they sense someone is trying to "convert" them. Using digital media to develop parasocial relationships with people in the community could be an effective way to break down this barrier, becoming a new contemporary application of Jesus' instructions in Mark 16:15: "Go into all the world and preach the Good News to everyone" (New Living Translation, 2015).

The purpose of this research is to understand how parasocial relationships can be developed by a pastor with people in the community, as well as the proactive communication tactics that can be employed to transition a parasocial relationship into an in-person, face-to-face social relationship. This paper proposes research to understand how parasocial relationships can be established in an evangelistic context. This study will also determine if the development of a parasocial relationship can accelerate the formation of an in-person social relationship, and if so,

what might be some ways to do this effectively. Specifically, what can the media personality do to proactively foster in-person encounters and develop these bidirectional social relationships in real life?

<div align="center">**Literature Review**</div>

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has some characteristics unique among evangelical churches, leading to a longer evangelistic process. The theory of parasocial relationships offers a model for accelerating the development of redemptive relationships that are important for successful evangelism.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is an evangelical Protestant denomination which arose out of the Second Great Awakening in the United States in the 1840s (Bull & Lockhart, 2007). Today the denomination has over 22 million members around the world (General Conference, 2023), and in the United States and Canada there are over 1.2 million people who are members in about 5,700 local congregations (General Conference, 2022). A 2009 study pointed out that it was one of the fastest growing denominations in the United States (MacDonald, 2011), and over the 6 years prior to the Covid-19 pandemic church membership grew 5.4% in this country, through 2019 (NAD Secretariat, 2023). This growth occurred even as many mainline denominations saw membership decline (Burge, 2021).

The Seventh-day Adventist Church runs the second largest educational system in the world, with 6,721 elementary schools, 2,699 high schools, and 118 institutions of higher education (General Conference, 2023). The church is also known for its healthcare system, with 230 hospitals and 1,906 clinics around the world overseen by the denomination (General Conference, 2023). Due to healthy lifestyle practices encouraged by the church, members have

been noted for their longevity, living an average of ten years longer than the general population

(Buettner, 2012). The Seventh-day Adventist Church has also been highlighted as a particularly

diverse denomination. A 2015 Pew Research Center report looked at 30 different religious

groups in the United States and found Seventh-day Adventists to be the most diverse among

them, with 37% of members White, 32% Black, 15% Latino, 8% Asian, and 8% mixed or other

(Lipka, 2015). Recently more non-White members have been added in North America each year

than White (Ford, 2023), suggesting a continuing growth in this diversity.

Membership is important in this faith community. Becoming a member requires deep

Bible study resulting in understanding and agreement with 28 fundamental beliefs (General

Conference, 2016, p. 44-48). Historically, certain changes in behavior were also expected prior

to becoming an official member, such as ceasing all tobacco and alcohol use. Once these

prerequisites are met, an individual becomes a member by being baptized by immersion. In those

cases where the individual was previously baptized, they could make a public profession of faith

instead (General Conference, 2016, pp. 50-51).

The denomination's 28 fundamental beliefs share many with other Protestant

denominations. These include the infallibility of Scripture, the Holy Trinity, and the loving grace

of God expressed through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (General Conference, 2015).

Of course, as with every denomination, some beliefs are outside the mainstream. For example,

weekly worship gatherings occur on Saturday, not Sunday, due to the belief that the seventh day

of the week is the Sabbath, which the church understands to be blessed by God as holy and set

aside for rest (e.g., New Living Translation, 2015, Ex. 20:8-11). The denomination also places a

strong emphasis on the Second Coming of Jesus, believes in soul sleep, and makes a theological

connection between godly living and personal health.

The biblical literacy required to understand the fundamental beliefs of the church is significant, and the process of becoming a member can take months or even years. Membership can require a substantial shift in an individual's belief structure, and sometimes also requires a radical change in lifestyle. Because of this, the way Seventh-day Adventist churches practice evangelism is quite unique compared to other evangelical churches (Anderson, 2014; Walter, 2018). In the end, however, Seventh-day Adventists are simply co-laborers with other Christians in pursuing the Great Commission of Jesus: "Go and make disciples of all the nations" (New Living Translation, 2015, Mt. 28:19).

While doctrine is important to Seventh-day Adventists, the most effective evangelism in the church connects with potential converts at a relational level (Walter, 2018). However, initiating these relationships can be difficult in contemporary society. Digital advertising on social media sites with video content offers a method for giving public exposure to a pastor or evangelist, and there is some evidence that this exposure can to lead to the building of parasocial relationships (Rester, 2022). Because of this, fostering online parasocial relationships offers an effective path to building these redemptive relationships.

Parasocial Relationships

One area of scholarship in psychology and communication media that has seen significant growth over the last decade is the study of parasocial relationships. Evidence for this as an up-and-coming area of academic research can be seen in a new hardbound book, *The Oxford Handbook of Parasocial Experiences,* which was published just 3 months ago. This handbook contains 19 authoritative papers on PSE phenomenon and looks at both the current state of scholarship and potential opportunities for future research (Forster, 2023).

The fundamental characteristic of a parasocial relationship is that someone develops the illusion of a relationship with a personality who communicates to them through the media. One scholar describes it as a "social connection that is non-reciprocated" (Stever, 2013, p. 210). This one-sided relationship appears to the audience to be a real social experience. In explaining the phenomenon, Munnukka and Reinikainen (2023) wrote, "Human brains are still unable to differentiate between interactions in real life and online virtual environments or with real friends and simulated or artificial friends, such as television actors, people encountered on social media, and even virtual influencers" (p. 359). The audience's parasocial experiences with a media personality lead to reactions that are surprisingly like those caused by real, in-person social experiences.

Parasocial relationships were first described by Horton and Wohl in 1956. Their seminal work was published just as television was attaining its new place as the dominant mass medium, and it attempted to explain the fact that people treat celebrities they encounter in the media as if they were in their personal circle of one's peers. They wrote, "One of the striking characteristics of the new mass media—radio, television, and the movies—is that they give the illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer" (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). The authors described the relationship between celebrity and audience members, writing, "Even if it is an imitation and a shadow of what is ordinarily meant by [intimacy], [it] is extremely influential with, and satisfying for, the great numbers who willingly receive it and share in it" (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 216).

The authors described several strategies for achieving this illusion of friendship. First, the performer uses casual gestures, conversational style, and other characteristics typical for an informal face-to-face encounter. Second, the celebrity maintains a stream of small talk, giving

the impression that he is interacting with and responding to the reactions of an invisible

participant. Third, the performer tries to blur the boundary that divides him from the audience,

often by interacting with the supporting cast as close friends. And finally, the actor may try to

step out of the particular format of the show and blend with the audience, perhaps by looking

directly into the camera or using the camera point of view to bring the audience into the scene.

Horton and Wohl's theory received little attention for more than 15 years until the first

empirical research on parasocial interactions was published in 1972 by Rosengren and Windahl

(Liebers & Schramm, 2023). The theory continued to receive limited academic interest until the

2000s, and by 2010 about 15 studies per year were being published. That number doubled by

2014, tripled in 2018, and quadrupled in 2020, when nearly 70 new publications of original

empirical studies were published on parasocial experiences (Liebers & Schramm, 2023).

The burst of research on parasocial relationships in recent years has been particularly

focused YouTube and other social media. For example, Chen (2016) looked at how YouTube

content creators revealed their digital identities and engaged in parasocial interactions. They

studied 45 amateur YouTube content creators in Taiwan, looking at how they revealed their

digital identities and engaged in parasocial interactions. A complex selection process resulted in

11 female participants and 34 male participants, all between 16 and 35 years of age. The

component parts of each participant's YouTube videos, such as audio, images, icons, and

gestures, were coded to identify content related to the digital self and parasocial interactions. The

researchers then coded this content according to the different strategies for digital-self

presentation and parasocial relationship development. Interviews were then conducted with each

participant, lasting between 1 and 3 hours, with questions related to the purposes of their videos,

what they chose to communicate, and how they chose material. After the initial coding and

interviews, new content continued to be coded and follow-up interviews were conducted

annually for the next 3 years.

YouTube was found to be particularly conducive to strategically presenting one's digital

self from a distance, and the researchers developed a taxonomy of 4 strategies for doing this.

First, *basking* strategy involved enhancing the performer's image by claiming association with

well-known celebrities. Second, *mystification* employed a strategy where a small, curated portion

of the digital self is revealed, hiding aspects of the performer's offline persona and emphasizing

other aspects that they feel are more presentable. Third, *self-promotion* is the act of highlighting

one's competence and accomplishments. Finally, *gender-switching* describes development of a

"whimsical identity" masking one's age, gender, race, or socioeconomic class, freeing

participants from their "corporeal selves, allowing for new designations of gender, physical

form, and unlimited symbolic materials to digitally self-present" (p. 247). The researchers

confirmed that "YouTube videos are like traditional TV characters who can arouse viewers to

parasocially make more friends and socialize with them" (p. 248).

In another study, Chung and Cho (2017) looked at how the use of social media by a

celebrity impacts their effectiveness as a product endorser. Drawing on Horton and Wohl's

(1956) description of parasocial interaction, which noted friendship, understanding, and

identification as important factors in parasocial relationships, the authors studied 400 young

adult Korean Wave fans in Singapore to empirically test their theoretical research model. They

used an online survey instrument to ask questions about their use of social media, parasocial

relationships, and self-disclosures, as well as their favorite Korean celebrities. Respondents were

also shown a mock advertisement featuring their selected celebrity, followed by questions about

the trustworthiness of the celebrity endorser, brand credibility, and purchase intentions.

The researchers found a correlation between social media interactions and parasocial relationships. They also found that self-disclosure was important in mediating the relationships between social media and parasocial relationships, stating, "An important characteristic of social media is intimate, frequent, and highly confessional messaging" (Chung & Cho, 2017, p. 483). They also noted, "Acts of disclosure imply that the discloser values the interpersonal relationship and wishes to maintain and nurture it. Therefore, consumers interpret celebrities' self-disclosure as a sign of friendship being offered" (Chung & Cho, 2017, p. 489). Finally, they revealed that "social media exchanges with consumers can also have tangible impacts on consumer marketing" (Chung & Cho, 2017, p. 490).

Laken (2009) found a significant difference in parasocial interaction and gender, with women having a significantly higher parasocial interaction level than men. However, they did not find any difference in ethnicity/race and parasocial interaction, and also found no difference between the type of celebrity and the level of parasocial interaction. In another study, Lotun et al. (2022) studied the impact of parasocial interventions on feelings of prejudice towards people with mental health issues. This quantitative study looked at a parasocial intervention they developed, discovering that the intervention lowered levels of explicit prejudice as well as intergroup anxiety. They also found that stronger parasocial bonds correlated with lower levels of prejudice, and that this lower prejudice was sustained over time. Bond (2021) also looked at the impact of parasocial relationships on prejudice, finding that exposure to fictional marginalized characters over the course of 10 weeks led to strong parasocial attachment to the characters. They also found that those with the strongest measured prejudice prior to the intervention experienced the most intense growth. The researched suggested that "audiences can

develop socioemotional bonds with outgroup television characters that can influence attitudes and behaviors much the same as direct, interpersonal intergroup contact" (Bond, 2021, p. 573).

Hoffner and Cohen (2023) looked at the effects of parasocial experiences on health outcomes. They noted that parasocial relationships help get people's attention and involvement in the message; contribute to the social diffusion of a message through a community; communicate the health outcome through modeling; break down the resistance to behavioral change; and increase perceived social norms related to the health message. Demetriades et al. (2023) explored parasocial experiences in the political arena, describing the relationship between political leaders and their followers as one based on "trust, perceived intimacy, and loyalty" (p. 336). They pointed out the uniqueness of the powerful parasocial relationship many voters have with Donald Trump, driven by the rawness of his social posts and brash demeanor. They also looked at whether the parasocial relationship predicted voter support, reporting on a statistical model of parasocial interactions that accounted for 82% of the variance in support for Trump.

Munnukka and Reinikainen (2023) wrote about the effects of parasocial experiences with spokespersons on consumer behavior. They suggested parasocial relationship theory offers a unified explanation for previous research on product endorsement, which looked at the credibility of the spokesperson, their attractiveness, the matchup compatibility between the spokesperson and the product, the shared meaning between the audience and the media personality, and the persuasion knowledge model, where consumers discount obviously commercial content. They noted communication from social media influencers are particularly powerful in overcoming resistance to advertising messages, because the audience considers the influencer to be a friend.

Walter et al. (2023) described the initiation and evolution of parasocial relationships. They highlighted research that looked at two different ways to explain the initiation of parasocial relationships: a process similar to in-person social relationships, and a process grounded in mediated interactions. There are several mechanisms that drive the growth of both social and parasocial relationships, including time spent together, whether focused time or spread across various encounters; perceived similarity between the media personality and the viewer; and the attraction of the media personality. Attraction includes physical attractiveness; social attractiveness, or how well the person fits into social groups; and task attractiveness, or how competent and successful the person is. The authors pointed out research that found social attractiveness is more important than physical attractiveness. They also noted research identifying self-disclosure as an important step in forming relationships, suggesting "the amount of personal information divulged by the media figure would intensify" parasocial relationships (Walter et al., 2023, p. 132).

Scholars have noted that parasocial experiences are not confined to mediated communication. Giles (2023) wrote, "Since antiquity, individuals could related to public figures, such as theater actors and politicians, even without knowing them personally" (p. 35). One author pointed out that students in a class of 500 listening to a professor lecture are forming parasocial relationships, since the professor does not know each one and does not interact with each one individually (Forster, 2023). It could be argued that the relationship many people had with Jesus on earth was parasocial in nature. When the crowds came to hear Jesus teach, he was not interacting with each one individually. One story in Matthew describes a crowd of "about 5,000 men" who came to hear Jesus (New Living Translation, 2015, Mt. 14:21), while another in the following chapter tells of "4,000 men … in addition to all the women and children" (New

Living Translation, Mt. 15:38). While not at all discounting the miraculous ability of Jesus to

know each person individually, the interactions for most people were one-sided, as they listened

to Jesus preach.

While there is a clear scholarly foundation for how to build and maintain parasocial

relationships, little attention has been paid to whether the media personality can transition a

parasocial relationship into an in-person, face-to-face social relationship. This is what the present

study will consider.

Research Questions

This research will look at both the initial development of a parasocial relationship as well

as the transition from parasocial to an in-person social relationship with the pastor. It will

therefore consider the following research questions:

1. Does frequent exposure to the pastor through digital videos lead to the establishment
   of parasocial relationships?

2. Does self-disclosure by the pastor through digital videos lead to the establishment of
   parasocial relationships?

3. Can a parasocial relationship effectively transition to an in-person social relationship?

4. What steps occurred in the process of building an in-person social relationship with
   someone who had an existing parasocial relationship?

5. What were the communication tactics used by the pastor to foster an in-person social
   relationship with someone who had an existing parasocial relationship?

6. What was the experience of the person with an existing parasocial relationship in
   building an in-person social relationship with the pastor?

Research Method

This study will use a phenomenological design to better understand the experience of people transitioning from a parasocial relationship to an in-person social relationship. This study design is particularly well-suited for exploratory research on a social phenomenon such as parasocial relationships, and has been used in prior research on the topic. For example, Anghelcev et al. (2021) looked at the experience of viewers binge-watching shows on streaming media services, finding the strength of parasocial relationships correlated with the amount of time spent binge-watching. Hutchison (2021) explored the historical phenomenology of American local television, noting that some rituals were truly social, not parasocial, due to regular face-to-face interactions between viewers and local television personalities. Yanchenko (2023) used a phenomenological design in their study, interviewing Ukrainian citizens using semi-structured questions to explore how voters understand the hyperreal politics surrounding the election of Volodymyr Zelensky.

This proposed study will employ semi-structured interviews via videoconference technology between the researcher and individuals who have been identified as having some form of an in-person social relationship with a pastor that developed after having experienced parasocial interactions via YouTube videos. The researcher will partner with SermonView Evangelism Marketing, who works with pastors to help them build such parasocial relationships in their community via recurring YouTube advertising videos. Working with these customers, in conjunction with evangelistic meeting attendance tracking records, the researcher will identify five individuals who meet this criteria. A series of semi-structured survey questions will then be asked, with the answers transcribed and coded for patterns.

Discussion

There are two steps to the relationships that will be studied. First, an individual develops a parasocial relationship with a pastor by viewing digital videos of the pastor. Then that relationship transitions into an in-person social relationship.

Hiram Rester (2022) wrote about a methodology he developed to use YouTube advertising to recruit members of the public to attend an evangelistic series, which appeared to foster parasocial relationships as a byproduct of the method. He described what appeared to be parasocial relationships that developed through this advertising, stating that an "interesting development is that as the local pastor, I am now frequently recognized in the community at stores and restaurants" (Rester, 2023, p. 9). He told the story of an 18-year-old male at a local restaurant asking excitedly, "Are you that YouTube Bible guy?" (H. Rester, personal communication, June 20, 2023). This led to a deeper spiritual conversation with the individual, which resulted in the relationship transitioning from parasocial to social as in-person contact continued.

One innovation of this approach is the use of advertising to buy a local audience. Up to this point, research on parasocial experiences on YouTube has focused almost exclusively on the organic reach of a media personality's channel through its subscriber base. However, establishing this subscriber base takes tremendous time and effort to develop, and success is not guaranteed. Furthermore, when successful this approach leads to a global audience, most of whom are located too far away from the media personality to ever interact in person.

Rather than working to build this organic audience, Rester's method simply buys a geographically-situated audience in the area surrounding the local church. He used 5-second skippable ads, which were more cost-effective because YouTube does not charge the advertiser

for a view unless the ad is watched for at least 30 seconds. This method also allows the audience

to self-select whether they are interested in the content or not, meaning advertising dollars are

not spent on people who have no interest in the content.

SermonView Evangelism Marketing, an advertising agency focused on church marketing

for evangelistic events, has adopted Hiram Rester's methodology to offer a YouTube advertising

service to its customers (SermonView, 2023a). As part of the service, the company coaches

pastors on how to record short selfie-style videos, then handles the postproduction of each video

and places the advertising on the pastor's behalf on YouTube. To help each pastor decide what

type of content to record, a guide was developed with "4 tips to create engaging content"

(SermonView, 2023a, p. 1). In addition, to help them record quality video another guide was

created describing the "5 keys to shooting better videos" (SermonView, 2023b, p. 1). A webinar

was also recorded interviewing Hiram Rester, who talked how a local church can adapt his

methods in its own ministry context (Ball, 2023).

Within the first 3 months of offering the service, nearly a dozen churches had already

started using the service to run video ads. In particular, one pastor and one evangelist are each

spending significant advertising budgets over several months to test this method. Parasocial

experience theory suggests that the frequency of exposure and the self-disclosure occurring in

these videos will lead to the successful establishment of parasocial relationships with some

members of the audience (Walter et al., 2023).

As the evangelistic meetings approach, the advertising will transition to a strong call to

action inviting people to attend the meetings. It is therefore expected that some of the parasocial

relationships will drive some of the individuals to participate in an evangelistic series, due to the

attraction of celebrity interaction (Giles, 2023). Based on previous experience with participants

in this type of meeting, it is also expected that some who participate will choose to join the

church as members (Burrell, 2018; B. Corbett, personal communication, July 12, 2023). This

would lead the relationship with the pastor to transition from parasocial to social. It is those who

successfully follow this path from parasocial to social relationship who will be interviewed as

part of this phenomenological study.

Anticipated Results

There are several results expected from this research. First, it is expected that some

parasocial relationships will develop, due to both the frequency of exposure and the self-

disclosure of the pastor in these videos, as parasocial relationship theory predicts. It is also

expected that some people who develop a parasocial relationship will successfully transition to

an in-person social relationship with the pastor. Finally, it is anticipated that the interviews with

people who transitioned from a parasocial relationship to a social relationship will provide some

indication of the behavior of the pastor and other local church leaders that helped to foster this

transition. Expected patterns of behavior might include personal invitation to visit in person or

attend a meeting hosted at the local church, direct communication via voice call, text message, or

email;

Conclusion

In this post-Covid-19 era, people are more isolated than ever, making it difficult for

pastors and evangelists to establish redemptive relationships with people in the community.

Digital video advertising offers a path to develop parasocial relationships by reaching people

where they are. Once established, these parasocial relationships can be leveraged to engage these

people in person, leading the relationship to transition to a social one based on two-way

communication. If this methodology is successful, it could unlock new evangelistic channels. It

also has the potential to expand parasocial relationship theory to better understand the mechanics

leading to a transition from parasocial to social relationship.

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