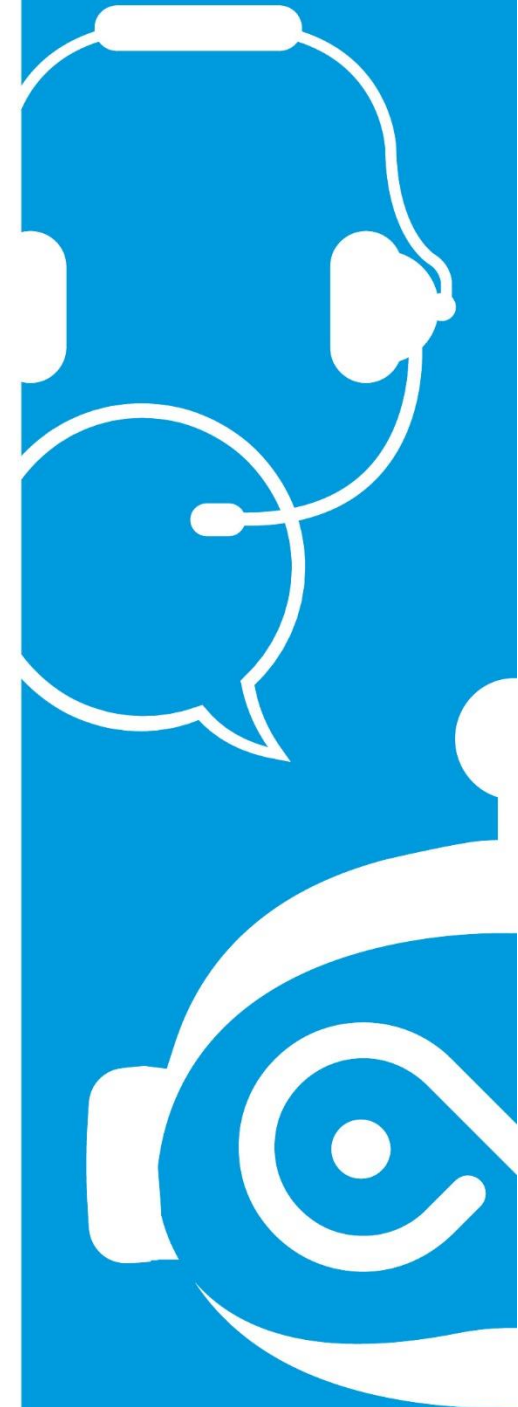




PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

What is it?

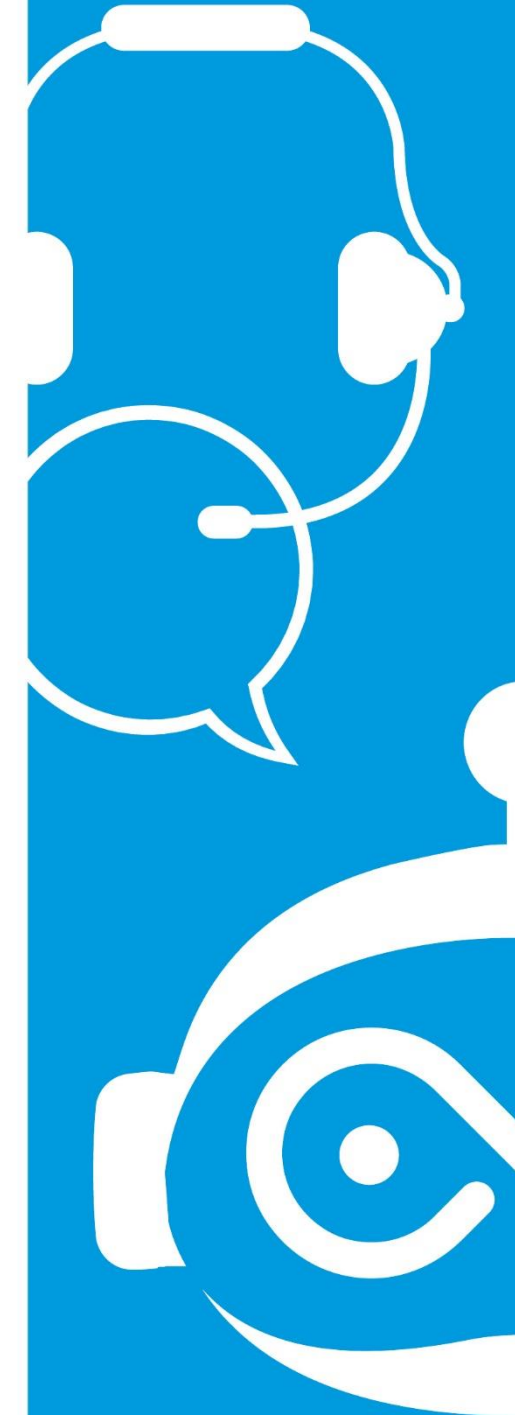
Parasocial relationships are **digital phenomena** that occur when users establish a one-sided relationship with famous people, celebrities, influencers or even fictional characters. These relationships are described as 'parasocial' because they are directed towards people for whom we feel some kind of admiration (or even revulsion) but whom we don't know in real life.



How can it impact the sexual and reproductive health of youth?

These relationships can affect the SRH of young people in a number of ways:

- **Distorted perceptions of healthy relationships:** Focusing on the life of a famous person online depicts idealised and unreal images of sexuality and relationships. Young people can be influenced to believe that certain behaviours, such as displays of promiscuity or engaging in 'purity' culture, are normal and expected, which could lead to unrealistic expectations about sexuality and relationships.
- **Body image concerns:** Parasocial relationships can contribute to body image dissatisfaction among youth. Constant exposure to media representations of idealised bodies may lead to self-esteem issues, body shaming, or disordered eating behaviours with potential negative consequences for sexual and reproductive health.
- **Influence on sexual decisions:** Young people may be influenced to make decisions about their sexual health based on what they see in the media or in the lives of media figures they follow, rather than making informed decisions based on their own situation and needs. Messages conveyed by celebrities or influencers regarding the promotion of certain products such as contraception, sex toys and alternative medicine can shape youths' attitudes and choices.
- **Emotional impact:** Parasocial relationships can generate intense emotions and trigger unrealistic comparisons and expectations regarding sexual self-image and romantic relationships, which could lead to anxiety, depression, or dissatisfaction.



What are some ways in which youth can be supported?

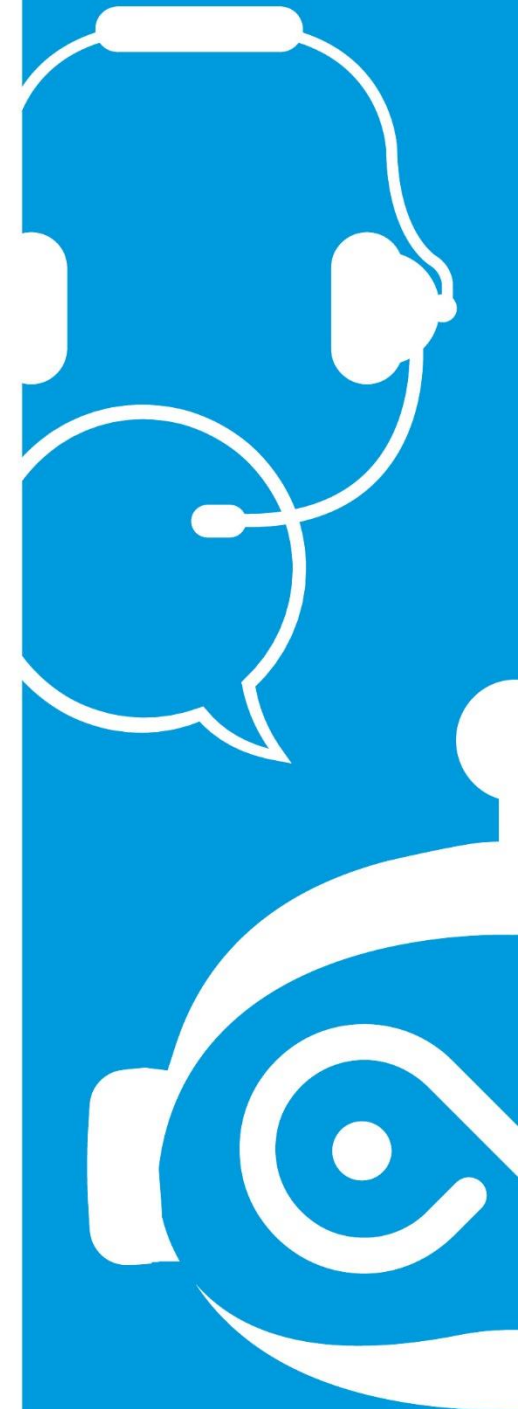
To mitigate these impacts:

- Encourage open and honest conversations about the people young people follow or read about online to help them develop critical thinking about media portrayals.
- Suggest limiting time spent online. The amount of time spent using digital tools, especially social media, can also be analysed and if necessary, reduced, in order to achieve a digital detox.
- Organise and promote taking part in social activities in-person, such as nonformal education groups as a way to acquaint young people with real-world social dynamics and prevent idealisation of celebrities and influencers online.

Related digital phenomena/tools:

See sheets:

- Consumer culture: Influencer marketing
- Consumer culture: Targeted ads
- Social media: Instagram



Further reading:

- Dekoninck, Heleen, and Desirée Schmuck. "The 'Greenfluence': Following Environmental Influencers, Parasocial Relationships, and Youth's Participation Behavior." *New Media & Society*, March 2, 2023, 146144482311561. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231156131>.
- Hoffner, Cynthia A., and Bradley J. Bond. "Parasocial Relationships, Social Media, & Well-Being." *Current Opinion in Psychology* 45 (June 2022): 101306. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101306>.
- Liu, Piper Liping. "Parasocial Relationship in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Moderated Mediation Model of Digital Media Exposure on Political Trust among Chinese Young People." *Computers in Human Behavior* 141 (April 2023): 107639. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2022.107639>.

