

The Presence of Political Parasocial Interaction in the Websites of U.S. Senators

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ABSTRACT

The growing trend of parasocial activity in the digital age has altered how the public views political leaders and makes informed voting decisions. This study assesses the relationship between website interface and website user with specific regard to parasocial activity in politics and its implications. Through a QUAL-QUAN content analysis of the campaign websites of each member of the U.S. Senate, this study identified trends in website interface designs that could foster parasocial interactions. Accordingly, the trends were validated with a qualitative comparative analysis that utilized accredited sources as a model for what constitutes parasocial interaction. My results are conclusive with respect to certain website components: call-to-action, social media content, biographical content, newsletter forms, and constituent services that appear with significant frequency across all campaign websites. When compared with the models of the accredited sources, they revealed that the placement and content of these website components can be purposed to foster parasocial interaction between website interface and website user. However, the results may have been influenced by political bias or the errors of manual content analysis of various website components at a large scale. On a broader scope, this paper hopes to draw attention to a less commonly analyzed form of media, the website, in the field of research on parasocial activity. Furthermore, it may serve as a basis for reflection on the possible effects of the presence of political parasocial interaction on websites on the website user, and the United States' political processes in an increasingly digital era.

Introduction

“Can you hear me?”¹—These are the first words spoken by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to her Twitch stream on October 20th, 2020. After encouraging viewers to visit the “I Will Vote” website at the start of the stream, the New York representative was set to play the popular video game, *Among Us*, alongside prominent creators on the streaming platform—none of whom, unlike their guest, had ever stepped foot inside of Capitol Hill. The stream, accompanied by a live chat teeming with messages ranging from “no one cares” to “I love you” in all uppercase letters, went on to win a Guinness World Record with a record viewership of over 400,000 people.²

Ocasio-Cortez’s success is in part due to the novel nature of the relationship between her and her audience. Rather than interact solely through the constraints of traditional media events, such as exclusive press conferences and high-profile interviews, she interacts directly with her supporters. On a broader scale, such relationships are not a new phenomenon in politics. They can be embodied by the term, “parasocial interaction,”

¹ Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, “Twitch,” Twitch, 26:41, October 20, 2020, <https://www.twitch.tv/videos/817942495?t=00h26m46s..>

² Allegra Frank, “AOC Met More than 400,000 Young Potential Voters on Twitch,” Vox, October 22, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/10/22/21526625/>.

first defined by University of Chicago sociologists Donald Horton and Richard Wohl in 1956.³ In a study on television performers and their viewers, Horton and Wohl noted key elements of parasocial interaction—the persona (the character presented by the performer to the audience), the perceived mutual intimacy between the audience and television persona, and the efforts of the television performers and producers to foster the development of the parasocial relationship. It is important to note that parasocial *interaction* differs from a parasocial *relationship*, in that parasocial *interaction* refers to the connection between viewer and television persona while viewing; whereas a parasocial *relationship* involves emotional investment in the persona—a type of loyalty that extends beyond the screen.⁴

Since 1956, the emergence of media platforms other than television—such as social media, streaming platforms, and podcasts—have provided a multitude of opportunities for media personalities to cultivate parasocial relationships with users. While parasocial activity is associated with celebrities, the same can be seen in politics. Examples include Franklin D. Roosevelt’s series of radio broadcasts, called “fireside chats,”⁵ to the American public during his presidency, or today’s unprecedented surge of social media usage by members of the U.S. Congress.⁶ However, upon researching the presence of political parasocial interaction on modern platforms, the website is relatively unmentioned as a form of engagement between user and political persona. Therefore, it is valuable to investigate how websites and their interfaces indicate political parasocial interaction, and as a result, stimulate political parasocial relationships.

Literature Review

To understand the significance of the website in fostering parasocial interaction, it is necessary to examine the literature around the intersecting topics of parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships, media as a tool for parasocial activity, and the political implications of the former. To begin, the founding research on parasocial interaction originates from Donald Horton and Richard Wohl’s 1956 study.⁷ Horton and Wohl examine the relationship between television performers and audience members, aiming to define the circumstances around the illusion of face-to-face interaction between the two parties. According to Horton and Wohl, the performer takes upon a persona, a Jungian archetype defined as “the personality that an individual projects to others.”⁸ With repeated media exposure to the persona, the viewer develops a familiarity with them, beginning to view the persona as a source of comfort. Moreover, the performer caters their persona to the audience by fostering an intimacy, in which the performer blurs the line between them and the audience through intentional design decisions. Horton and Wohl note, for instance, the “subjective-camera” idea, in which camera and dialogue are manipulated to make the viewer feel they are participating in the scene alongside their favorite character(s). As a result of such techniques, the audience further feeds into the persona and responds to the performer’s perceived “sincerity” with loyalty. The audience’s support may extend beyond the screen as they “assume a sense of

³ Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl, “Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction,” *Psychiatry* 19, no. 3 (August 1956): 215–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1956.11023049>.

⁴ Jayson L. Dibble, Tilo Hartmann, and Sarah F. Rosaen, “Parasocial Interaction and Parasocial Relationship: Conceptual Clarification and a Critical Assessment of Measures,” *Human Communication Research* 42, no. 1 (March 17, 2016): 21–44, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hcre.12063>.

⁵ David Michael Ryfe, “Franklin Roosevelt and the Fireside Chats,” *Journal of Communication* 49, no. 4 (December 1, 1999): 80–103, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1999.tb02818.x>.

⁶ Patrick van Kessel et al., “Congress Soars to New Heights on Social Media,” Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech, July 16, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/07/16/>.

⁷ Horton and Wohl, “Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction,” 215–229.

⁸ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopedia. “persona,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, April 4, 2008. <https://www.britannica.com/science/persona-psychology>.

personal obligation to the performer, to help him in his struggle for “success” if he is “on the way up,” or to maintain his success if he has already won it.” In summary, performers deliberately curate a favorable media persona to secure enduring support from viewers. While Horton and Wohl’s study was restricted by a popular media platform of its time, it remains an essential pillar in research on other media types. Additionally, the study’s focus on television actors can extend to other figures, such as celebrities,⁹ brands, and politicians.

In their perspective, Nanda Kumar and Izak Benbasat argue a different media form, the website, is a valid social actor and can facilitate a relationship between interface and user.¹⁰ First, Kumar and Benbasat make the case for the website as a social entity through research from the Center for the Study of Language and Information at Stanford. In the study, websites tended to elicit much of the same social responses from their users as that of live media personae from their viewers. Kumar and Benbasat further emphasize this point by personifying the website themselves, referring to the digital body as “her.” Additionally, Kumar and Benbasat define a new sector of parasocial activity specific to a website interface, called parasocial *presence*, to indicate the “underlying psychological cues that measure the level and extent of interaction among participating social entities.” Their argument is situated within the world of online shopping, treating the website as an extension of a company’s brand. If the website presents its brand in a certain way, it can facilitate a sense of closeness, understanding, involvement, and positive effect with the user. Therefore, there is value in the potential of a website as a social actor if the brand can achieve the effects of a traditional parasocial interaction. The paper goes on to cite from a variety of existing research on website interface design to define specific parameters for parasocial presence on a website. For example, a prominent overlapping characteristic between sources is Immediacy of Feedback, which is defined as “the extent to which a medium allows users to give rapid feedback on the communications they receive.”

While Kumar and Benbasat’s paper restricts itself to a commercial interpretation (due to its focus on online-shopping), their overall argument supplies foundation for Yotam Ophir and Gabriel Weimann’s case study on parasocial interaction on the website of Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA), a terrorist organization.¹¹ Ophir and Weimann’s study looks at ETA’s website design tactics and how they might enable the organization to enlist supporters and gain Western sympathy. Although Ophir and Weimann do not use the specific term, “parasocial presence,” their findings align with Kumar and Benbasat’s central principles. Ophir and Weimann conduct their study of the website’s underlying psychological cues through in-depth analysis of content, body language in website videos, color schemes, imagery, and overall user experience. Through these elements, the study found overwhelming evidence for the website as a platform for parasocial interaction and potential parasocial relationships. Ophir and Weimann note, for example, ETA’s attempt to engage users beyond the website itself by prompting them to follow the organization’s social media, through which users can further interact with the members. Other components such as petitions, support pages, custom graphic icons of ETA figures, etc. serve to increase involvement and intimacy with the website, and thereby with ETA. Furthermore, video interviews with members of the organization are deliberately directed in such a way that elicit sympathy and relatability from the viewer—a technique similar to Horton and Wohl’s “subjective-camera” lens.

As shown in the Ophir and Weimann study on the terrorist organization, ETA, there are substantial real-world implications to parasocial interactions and parasocial relationships when in use by certain individuals

⁹ Dave de Guzman Centeno, “Parasociality and Habitus in Celebrity Consumption and Political Culture: A Philippine Case Study,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 44, no. 4/5 (2016): 441–84, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685314-04404002>.

¹⁰ Nanda Kumar and Izak Benbasat, “Para-Social Presence and Communication Capabilities of a Web Site: A Theoretical Perspective,” *E-Service Journal* 1, no. 3 (2002): 5, <https://doi.org/10.2979/esj.2002.1.3.5>.

¹¹ Yotam Ophir and Gabriel Weimann, “From Terrorist to Persona: Para-Social Interaction and the ETA Website,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 6, no. 1 (January 2012), <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/261025454>.

or organizations. In particular, parasocial activity plays an increasingly important role in politics, whether it be in the actions of voters or the politicians themselves. Drew Westen, a professor in the Departments of Psychology and Psychiatry at Emory University, says in his book, *The Political Brain*, “Two-thirds of voters’ decisions to support one candidate or another could be accounted for by two simple variables: their partisan feelings and their feelings towards the candidates. Candidates’ positions on the issues had only a modest effect on their electoral preferences.”¹² The second aspect of the voter decision—“their feelings towards the candidates”—is prime to be molded by parasocial tactics on behalf of the politician. A notable instance comes from Shira Gabriel, Elaine Paravati, Melanie C. Green, and Jason Flomsbee at the University of Buffalo in a study that examined the connection between viewers’ parasocial relationships formed with Donald Trump through his reality television show, *The Apprentice*, and voter behavior during the 2016 presidential election.¹³ They state, “parasocial bonds with Trump predicted believing Trump’s promises, disregarding his unpopular statements, and having generally more positive evaluations of him...”

Evidently, politicians have reason to value the effects of parasocial engagement on voters, as strong parasocial bonds with politicians are likely to lead to greater political support. While this concept is not new within the scholarly debate around parasocial activity, there is a lack of research on how political parasocial interaction and political parasocial relationships are fostered on websites. Kumar and Benbasat’s perspective on the parasocial presence and communication capabilities of a website, as well as Ophir and Weimann’s case study on the execution of such a parasocial presence, raise the question of whether politicians deliberately engage in parasocial activity to gain voter loyalty. Studies such as Gabriel, Paravati, Green, and Flomsbee’s are proof of the implications of such a practice, and prompt further research into how websites allow politicians to foster political parasocial relationships with their supporters.

Methodology

This research serves to answer the question: *Do the campaign websites of U.S. Senators indicate a parasocial presence?* Through a qualitative-quantitative content analysis, my findings included (1) analysis of the official campaign websites of all one-hundred current U.S. senators for trends indicating a parasocial presence, and (2) the quantification of those trends to assess their prevalence within the group being analyzed. Trends were established by both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the content analysis. Following data collection, I conducted a comparative analysis to determine comparability between the results of this study and the parameters of parasocial presence on the web given by the Kumar and Benbasat study. I then analyzed findings from the comparative analysis and the content analysis to deem the overall research conclusive or inconclusive. The hope of this study is to apply its results to the United States’ broader political landscape, and prompt reflection on the implications of parasocial activity on American democratic processes.

Delimitations

It is important to note choices made before the study was conducted that affected its outcome and the factors under which its results should be interpreted. For one, although international research on political parasocial activity exists, this study focuses specifically on the United States due to it being one of many western, demo-

¹² Drew Westen, *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007).

¹³ Shira Gabriel et al., “From Apprentice to President,” *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 9, no. 3 (March 26, 2018): 299–307, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550617722835>.

cratic nations that are largely the focus of such studies. Countries with more direct political systems are appropriate grounds for assessing the presence of parasocial activity¹⁴ within the context of my study, which hopes to address the implications of parasocial activity on democratic processes. Additionally, I decided to focus specifically on the U.S. Senate because of position within the United States government’s legislative branch, of which its direct role in policy-making is significant to the possible implications of the study. Purely because of time-constraints, conducting a content analysis on the campaign websites of one-hundred members of the U.S. Senate was also more achievable than analyzing the campaign websites of four-hundred and thirty-five members of the U.S. House of Representatives. Furthermore, I limited my analysis to the campaign websites listed on the official website of the U.S. Senate (senate.gov)¹⁵ that were characterized by a “.gov” handle. Some senators have other campaign websites in addition to the one listed next to their name on the U.S. Senate website’s register.¹⁶ It should also be noted that the official “.gov” campaign websites are the first to appear when one searches up a senator’s name, meaning that website is most likely the primary source of information about the senator for a user on the web. Finally, I only analyzed the home pages and biography sections of each website, as they presented the greatest opportunity for personalization by each politician, and therefore was most valuable for the study to assess. Time constraints again played a factor, as not only would analyzing every single section and subsection of a website’s layout hierarchy include collecting information irrelevant to the study, but it would also be time-consuming in the scope of a manual data collection process.

QUAL-QUAN Content Analysis

I analyzed each website in alphabetical order by senators’ names to prevent bias by party affiliation. To avoid confirmation bias, I first identified and collected data from each website before identifying trends within that data. Per the expected standards for website layout, each website generally followed the same structure and, due to them all serving the same purpose, generally had the same type of content. Therefore, I was able to divide my focus on specific components of the website. Within the home page (see Table 1 for definitions of each component), I focused on basic components such as the header, footer, hero image, website content, call to action (CTA), form, and logo. A component I found unique to the campaign websites, but unanimously present in all of them, was a section for a constituent services menu. I considered this a basic component in my analysis because, similar to the other components, it is integral to the structure of a political campaign website because of the services it provides for the user. With regards to the biography section, I focused on the same components such as images, content, and CTA. In identifying these components, I noted whether each senator had these components and to what degree in order to account for variations in design or format. Finally, once I collected the data, I quantified the results in percentages—for example, “X% of senators used 1st-person pronouns (“I, me, we, us”) in their CTA.” In looking at both two types of data, I was able to identify trends present across the one-hundred websites.

Table 1. Basic Components of a Website

Component	Definition*
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¹⁴ Moh Abdul Hakim and James H. Liu, “Development, Construct Validity, and Measurement Invariance of the Parasocial Relationship with Political Figures (PSR-P) Scale,” *International Perspectives in Psychology* 10, no. 1 (January 2021): 13–24, <https://doi.org/10.1027/2157-3891/a000002>.

¹⁵ “Floor Proceedings,” *U.S. Senate*, <https://www.senate.gov/>.

¹⁶ “Senators,” United States Senate, n.d., <https://www.senate.gov/senators/index.htm>.

Header	The top-most part of a website. It is often the first thing users see, containing the senator’s logo and website menu. The website menu is a map of the site that helps users find what they are looking for, usually containing links to the senator’s biography section, contact button, social media, constituent services, and newsletter.
Footer	The bottom-most part of a website. It contains a sitemap, including links that are not directly displayed on the header. The footer often includes the senator’s office locations, as well as social media icons that link to their respective social media platforms.
Hero image	An oversized banner image at the top of a website. Along with the header, it is often the first thing the users see. Campaign websites typically feature one of three (or multiple, if they use a slideshow feature) types of hero images: a picture of the senator themselves, the senator in action—speaking with supporters, making a speech, etc.—or images of the senator’s respective state.
Website content	A website’s content consists of two different tools: words and buttons. Words written on a website explain what the website is about, what the senator has to offer, and how the user can take advantage of the senator’s services. Buttons direct users to different components of the website and help characterize the senator’s services.
Call-to-action (CTA)	A short piece of text on a website that directs the user to take a specific action, or informs the user of what to expect when they click on a button. Call-to-action is often used with helping the user contact the senator, sign up for the senator’s newsletter, or access their constituent services.
Form	An online form embedded into a website that is generally used to gather information. Forms are typically used to gather a user’s contact information, allow a user to sign up for a senator’s newsletter, or to collect user feedback for the senator.
Logo	An essential component of a website that serves to represent a senator and make their brand recognizable to the public. They can be typically found in the website’s header and can be clicked to redirect the user to the website’s home page.
Constituent Services	Encompasses a wide array of non-legislative activities undertaken by Members of Congress or congressional staff, and it is commonly considered a representational responsibility. ¹⁷

*The Wix Blog’s piece, “Most Essential Parts of a Website,”¹⁸ was used as a reference to accurately define some components. Additional information is in accordance with the nature of the typical senator’s campaign website.

Qualitative Comparative Analysis

¹⁷ Sarah J. Eckman, “Constituent Services: Overview and Resources,” Congressional Research Service, January 5, 2017, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R44726.pdf>.

¹⁸ Amanda Weiner, “Most Essential Parts of a Website,” Wix Blog, March 23, 2021, <https://www.wix.com/blog/2021/03/parts-of-a-website/>.

The comparative analysis is essential to situating the research within the scholarly debate on political parasocial activity. I chose to conduct the analysis with Kumar and Benbasat’s perspective, as their paper provides a research model for identifying parasocial presence from a variety of established sources on website communication characteristics. Their media characteristics table (Table 2) and general research model (Figure 2) was used as a point of reference to validate or invalidate the research findings. If trends identified in the content analysis were in line with Kumar and Benbasat’s guidelines for identifying parasocial presence, I deemed the findings conclusive. This gave greater clarity to the foundations of my research, which stemmed from pieces such as Kumar and Benbasat’s.

Table 2. Media Characteristics developed in previous research.

Media Characteristic	Definition	Notes
Daft and Lengel (1986), Daft, Lengel and Trevino (1987)—Media Richness Theory ¹⁹		
Immediacy of Feedback	The extent to which a medium allows users to give rapid feedback on the communications they receive	
Multiple Cues	The number of cues—such as text, verbal cues or non-verbal cues—available through which information can be communicated	
Language Variety	The range of meaning that can be conveyed with language symbols (numeric information to natural language)	
Personal Focus	The extent to which a sender can personalize the message to suit the needs and the current situation of the receiver	
Dennis and Valacich, 1999—Media Synchronicity Theory: Refined List of Media ²⁰		
Symbol Variety	The number of ways in which information can be communicated	Similar to ‘Multiple Cues’ and ‘Language Variety’
Burgoon et al. (2000)—Mindfulness and Interpersonal Communication ²¹		
Modality	The extent to which a media can support symbol variety to present rich information	Similar to ‘Immediacy of Feedback’

¹⁹ Linda Klebe Trevino, Robert H. Lengel, and Richard L. Daft, “Media Symbolism, Media Richness, and Media Choice in Organizations,” *Communication Research* 14, no. 5 (October 1987): 553–74, <https://doi.org/10.1177/009365087014005006>.

²⁰ Alan R. Dennis, Robert M. Fuller, and Joseph S. Valacich, “Media, Tasks, and Communication Processes: A Theory of Media Synchronicity,” *MIS Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (September 2008): 575–600.

²¹ Judee K. Burgoon, Charles R. Berger, and Vincent R. Waldron, “Mindfulness and Interpersonal Communication,” *Journal of Social Issues* 56, no. 1 (December 17, 2000): 105-127, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-4537.00154>.

Synchronicity	Whether the interaction occurs in real-time or with a time delay	Similar to ‘Personal Focus’
Contingency	The extent to which a person’s queries and responses are dependent on the prior responses of the participating entity	Similar to ‘Personal Focus’
Participation	The extent to which senders and receivers are actively engaged in the interaction	
Identification	The extent to which the participants are fully or partially identified or anonymous	
Propinquity	Whether the participants are in the same location or geographically dispersed	
Anthropomorphism	The degree to which the interface simulates or incorporates humanlike characteristics	
Dov Te’eni (2001): The Three dimensions of Media Richness ²²		
Interactivity	The potential for immediate feedback from the receiver; it is manifested by simultaneous, synchronous, and continuous exchange of information	Similar to ‘Immediacy of Feedback’
Adaptiveness	The potential to personalize a message to a particular receiver	Similar to ‘Personal Focus’
Channel Capacity	The potential to transmit a high variety of cues and language	Similar to ‘Multiple Cues,’ ‘Language Variety,’ and ‘Symbol Variety’

Although there are a variety of media characteristics listed above, characteristics that are noted as “similar to” another characteristic will not be mentioned in the results of the comparative analysis. Instead, the original characteristic that the other characteristic was listed by Kumar and Benbasat as “similar to” will be used as an overarching term.

It should also be noted that media characteristics from the Sproull source and the Dennis, Fuller, and Valacich source cited in Kumar and Benbasat’s piece were not included, by reason of their lack of applicability to the study. For example, one term, ‘Multiple Addressability’—the extent to which a message can be forwarded to several persons—is significant only to platforms with messaging services, a communication characteristic the campaign websites do not have. Additionally, Kumar and Benbasat note that the “exact definition” for the media characteristics from the Sproull and Dennis, Fuller, and Valacich papers are to be established, unlike the terms included in Table 2. Likewise, the media characteristics ‘Rehearsability’ and ‘Reprocessability’ were excluded from the research process for the same reason.

²² Dov Te’eni, “Review: A Cognitive-Affective Model of Organizational Communication for Designing IT,” *MIS Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (June 2001): 251, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3250931>.

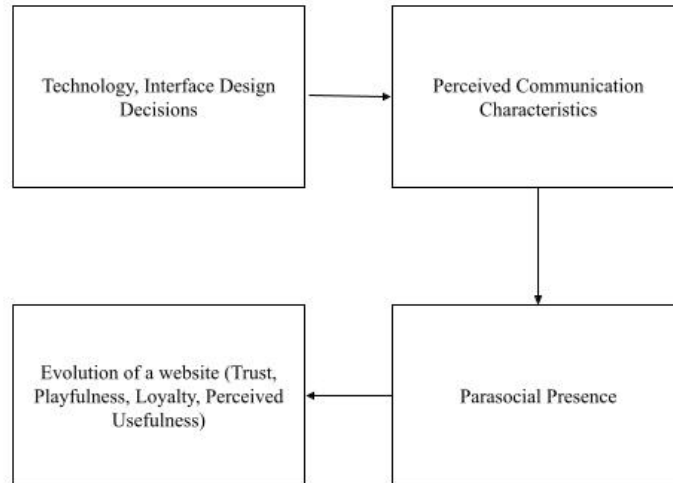


Figure 1. General Research Model

Findings

Over the course of analyzing one-hundred websites, five trends emerged. Below, I briefly identify and define these trends.

Table 3. Definitions of Identified Trends

Trend	Definition
Promotion of social media	Features social media on the website, prompting the user to interact with the senator on platforms that extend beyond the website
Newsletter sign-ups	Contains a newsletter for which users can sign up to receive updates on the senator’s campaign
Emphasis of family values	Contains messages and personal details in the biography section that suggest a prioritization of family values
CTA and personal pronouns	Uses first-person pronouns (“I, me, we us”) and second-person pronouns (“you”) in reference to the user
Constituent services and personal pronouns	Offers services by using first-person pronouns (“I, me, we us”) and second-person pronouns (“you”) in reference to the user

To assess the significance of each trend and the circumstances around its emergence, I quantified the results in percentage form in the table below.

Table 4. Quantitative Data of Identified Trends

Trend	Percentage of Websites with This Trend
Promotion of social media	

Located in header	71%
Located in social media section on home page	74%
Newsletter Sign-Ups	
Has a newsletter	67%
Filter for Topics	17%
Emphasis of Family Values	
Mentions family members	98%
Mentions personal details and messages	37%
Contains 2 or more pictures of family	22%
CTA and Personal Pronouns	
First-person pronouns (“I, me, we us”)	22%
Second-person pronouns (“you”)	9%
Constituent Services and Personal Pronouns	
Offers constituent services	100%
First-person pronouns (“I, me, we us”)	39%
Second-person pronouns (“you”)	9%

Discussion of Results

As established in Horton and Wohl’s study,²³ repeated exposure to the persona is a key element of forming a parasocial relationship. By placing social media links and newsletter subscriptions at accessible, prominently featured areas of the website such as the header or home page, users are likely to access a constantly updating social media feed or weekly emails in their inbox from the senator.

Focusing first on social media, it is important to emphasize the prevalence of social media use in the U.S. Senate. Of the one-hundred senators, one-hundred percent have Facebook and Twitter, ninety-six percent have Instagram and YouTube, and twenty-six percent have other forms of social media (eighteen have Flickr, a photo-sharing site, and nine have Medium, an online publishing platform). Today, senators are active on such

²³ Horton and Wohl, “Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction,” 215-229.

platforms at unprecedented levels, allowing them to engage with supporters in new and different ways.²⁴ Through social media, they further curate political personas, inviting the website user to peer into their personal lives. A notable example is Senator Cory Booker's Instagram,²⁵ on which his posts range from intimate reflections on life lessons he learned from his father²⁶ to videos of him interacting with members of his hometown.²⁷ Furthermore, most websites featured a section of the website dedicated to social media, embedding their latest tweets or Instagram posts to increase user interaction beyond the website. This embodies Burgoon's media characteristic in Table 2, 'Participation,' in which users can actively engage with the website by following, subscribing, liking, sharing, retweeting, and saving.

Another significant source of repeated exposure to the political persona is the newsletter—more specifically, the option to filter from a list what topics the user would like to know more about. Although only seventeen percent out of the sixty-seven percent of websites that had newsletter subscriptions offered such a feature, the presence of personalization aligns with 'Personal Focus.' While the user can personalize the content to their needs, senators can also use that personalized feedback from users to gain a better understanding of their support. Referring back to Horton and Wohl, the success of a persona in parasocial interaction is their ability to understand what their audience wants.

Therefore, emphasis on family values is an overwhelming trend on senators' websites. As politicians find more ways to connect with the public, the public grows more receptive to prioritizing personality over politics.²⁸ Hence, the biography section is an opportunity for senators to express their commitment to family, in the process attributing themselves with widely favored traits such as hard work and humility. Nearly all websites mentioned senators' family members by name, some even including pets to further endear the user to their political persona. A noteworthy trend included accrediting their political ambitions to family values they learned in childhood and through a family life of their own. Common themes in this trend were religious faith, community service, military service, immigrant backgrounds, small businesses, and outdoor hobbies. For example, Senator John Hickenlooper's biography includes several of these themes. Under "Hick's Hobbies," a website visitor can find: a timeline of his life from childhood to his future ambitions, a video lesson on banjo playing taught by the senator himself, the senator's personal home brew recipe, and a catalog of the dogs the senator has owned over his lifestyle.²⁹ Moreover, while biographies typically had an obligatory portrait picture of the senator, a significant number of senators included two or more pictures of family in their biographies as well. To re-emphasize the prevalence of social media, some also placed social media links in the biography section.

Kumar and Benbasat's focal argument for websites as platforms for parasocial activity is their assertion that websites can create an illusion of intimacy with their users, like that of Horton and Wohl's television actors and their audiences. In other words, websites can simulate face-to-face interaction to an extent that they have a

²⁴ van Kessel et al., "Congress Soars to New Heights on Social Media."

²⁵ Cory Booker, "Cory Booker (@Corybooker) • Instagram Photos and Videos," Instagram.com, 2013, <https://www.instagram.com/corybooker/>.

²⁶ Cory Booker, "Cory Booker on Instagram: 'My Dad Loved This Story and Believed That One's Past Doesn't Determine One's Future; We Do. #CoryStories,'" Instagram, May 18, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/reel/CdtVc_KLL1T/?.

²⁷ Cory Booker, "Cory Booker on Instagram: 'I Love Walking and Running around My Neighborhood, I Get to Connect with Folks Who Inform, Lift, and Even Challenge Me. These Women Were Just Awesome! #CoryStories,'" Instagram, May 18, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CduKpfUOLTx/?>.

²⁸ Yariv Tsfati et al., "Political Para-Social Relationship as a Predictor of Voting Preferences in the Israeli 2019 Elections," *Communication Research*, July 30, 2021, 009365022110328, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00936502211032822>.

²⁹ "About," *Senator John Hickenlooper*, <https://www.hickenlooper.senate.gov/about/>.

parasocial presence. This can be embodied in the media characteristic, ‘Anthropomorphism’—most evident in the prominent use of personal pronouns in CTA and constituent services. Using personal pronouns allows the website to speak directly to the user, appealing them to act on the messages they see on the website. Recurrent examples of anthropomorphic CTA are messages to the user such as, “email me” or “share your opinion.” Likewise, personal pronouns in website content are in line with the media characteristic, ‘Identification,’ where participants are fully identified with first-person pronouns or partially identified with second-person pronouns. Constituent services provide senators a direct opportunity for identification and anthropomorphism, as the use of personal pronouns in offering services such as tours and internships requires personal interest on behalf of the user. For instance, many senators presented their services with the phrase, “how can I help you?” Or, they referenced inhabitants of their respective state as a collective whole (“help for Arkansans,”) ³⁰ establishing the second “face” in a face-to-face interaction.

Additionally, twenty-three percent of websites offered users a translation service for the website content. I did not include this in the results because translation in itself does not indicate parasocial presence, but it broadens the scope of it by allowing diverse types of users to be influenced by the website’s parasocial presence. Consequently, the study fulfills the media characteristics of ‘Language Variety’ and ‘Propinquity.’ Finally, ‘Multiple Cues’ embodies the entire website, with cues for parasocial activity in the form of family images, contact buttons, social media links, etc. All such components on the website convey a piece of information the political persona shares with the users in order to foster parasocial interaction.

Overall, my findings reveal a combination of frequent patterns like prevalence of social media and emphasis on family values as well as other trends that occurred at smaller, yet still significant rates. In answering my research question, I conclude that the campaign websites of U.S. Senators *do* indicate a parasocial presence.

Limitations

Before we make conclusions about the research, it is necessary to acknowledge limitations in the research process and its subsequent results. First, the data collection process was purely manual and not run by a sophisticated, algorithmic system that would have been less prone to error than the human eye. I could have also analyzed more websites in a shorter amount of time, as well as not have had to restrict myself to the home page and biography section. This could have broadened the implications of my research and supplied me a wider source of data of which to analyze for trends. Another limitation goes back to the previous delimitation that I solely used “.gov” websites. Some “.gov” websites were noticeably outdated and inactive—alternative and newer “.com” websites may have more accurately represented the senator’s campaign. Unconscious political bias may have also ultimately led to judgmental errors that skewed the data.

Implications and Future Research

General awareness of not only parasocial activity, but *political* parasocial activity allows one to reflect on how they consume political content. As implied by the Gabriel, Paravati, Green, and Folmsbee piece on Donald Trump, parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships with political personas have extended consequences on the American political system. It is not just commercial brands that are aware of and cater to what their consumers want, but politicians as well, and these facts present themselves in the way campaign websites are created with an intended parasocial presence. As originally established in Horton and Wohl’s foundational piece, there is value in forming parasocial relationships with your audience, and this has been acknowledged increasingly in recent ages with the advent of numerous popular media platforms.

³⁰ “Home | U.S. Senator Cotton of Arkansas,” <https://www.cotton.senate.gov/>.

Digital media is still relatively new in the realm of communication research, therefore there are many avenues for further research. To begin, it would be valuable to research trends in website design by political party. For example, whether one party is more likely to include certain elements in their biography due to a larger percent of their supporter base identifying with that element. Another area of further research stems from my focus on the role of the persona in the parasocial relationship—it would be interesting to assess how the *user* is affected by the persona. Horton and Wohl already allude to this by noting how the viewer may see the television actor as their comforter or therapist. To conclude, I hope to have addressed the gap of political parasocial relationships by analyzing an unanticipated media type, the website, as a social actor in parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships. In an era of unprecedented levels of content and ways to manipulate the content we see, it is vital to the United States' political system that we analyze our relationship to that content.

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