The influence of parasocial interactions on Gen Z lives: participatory storytelling through Rivers of Life

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1.0 Introduction

The term "parasocial interaction" was first described by Horton and Wohl in 1956. When televisions became a popular form of entertainment, they found that TV viewers began to develop a sense of closeness with the characters on the screen. These interactions are one-sided social connections between people and media figures, characters, or celebrities (Konijn and Hoorn, 2017). Fans and followers feel a sense of intimacy and familiarity with the personae of their choice (Brooks, 2021). Becoming emotionally attached or invested to a popular icon may influence identity formation and shape behaviour in their fans (Tian and Yoo, 2015; Vazquez *et al.*, 2020; Sokolova and Perez, 2021).

Giles and Maltby (2006) described three dimensions of parasocial interactions. The first is entertainment-social where fans become attracted to a favourite media character or celebrity because of their perceived ability to entertain, enjoy themselves and socialise with others. They also become followers on social media. An example is making new friends as a result of sharing common likes of sports or athletes (Kassing and Sanderson, 2009; Solling, 2015; Pan and Zeng, 2018). The second dimension is intense-personal where fans develop intense feelings about their favourite media character or celebrity, akin to having obsessional tendencies to consider their favourite celebrity to be their soulmate. They also personally engage with a celebrity's artistic work and public persona to the point where they feel like they know the celebrity like a personal friend (Wohlfeil and Whelan, 2012). The third dimension of parasocial interaction is borderline-pathological where fans experience uncontrollable behaviours and fantasies about their celebrities, including the desire to sacrifice themselves to save the life of their celebrity (Ferris, 2001).

Stein et al (2024) compared viewers' parasocial interactions with either a human or digitally created online celebrity, otherwise called virtual influencers. They found that parasocial responses of the viewers were the same regardless of whether the personality of interest was human or virtual. In their study on beauty YouTube channels, Lee and Lee (2022) found that consumer purchase intention in Korean people in their 20s was influenced by parasocial interactions and vicarious experiences shared by the beauty channels. Another study in China found that parasocial interactions with TV programmes influenced perceived well-being and travel intentions in 381 undergraduate students (Bi, Yin and Kim, 2021). Elsewhere, a study in Indonesia reported the phenomenon of idol worship amongst fans of JTK48, an Indonesian-Japanese idol girl group. Here, idol worship significantly related with their parasocial interactions with JTK48 (Widiastuti *et al.*, 2020).

A majority of these studies have used quantitative research methods to analyse socio-behavioural constructs related to parasocial interactions (Rahimi Kolour, Kazemi and Beigi Firoozi, 2020; Bhattacharya, 2023), but not an arts-based participatory research method known as the Rivers of Life (Moussa, 2009; Hoffner and Bond, 2022). The qualitative method helps researchers to generate dialogue and reflection on experiences, enablers and barriers, including identifying solutions and strategies for change. It also offers self-expression through art, in this case, by drawing a river. Originally used as an ice-breaker exercise, the Rivers of Life method is a visual participatory research approach where a river symbolises a life journey and is used to portray barriers, enablers or choices (or lack thereof) experienced by a person or persons during their livelihood journeys (*Methods Vignettes: Rivers of Life*, no date). Rivers of Life has been used in training and professional development workshops (Berman and Brown, 1999; Carmody, 2023), and action research including psychotherapy (Prasko *et al.*, 2024), and studies on vulnerable populations (Ortiz Aragón and Hoetmer, 2020; Denov and Shevell, 2021; Dayil, 2023).

Teengs and Travers (2006) used the Rivers of life to understand the complexities and challenges faced by thirteen migrant aboriginal youth aged between 18 to 25, particularly their susceptibility to HIV after having moved to a city. Drawing their Rivers of Life enabled the youth to express their reasons for leaving their home communities to try to build new lives in the city where instead, they were confronted with the reality of city living, where they experienced racism, exploitation and loneliness were experienced. This resulted in them trying to cope by earning money through survival sex. Analysis of their rivers revealed that broader social factors such as race and ethnicity, housing and poverty were associated with increased risk of HIV infections amongst migrant aboriginal youth, and subsequently led to recommendations for change. These youth were born of Generation Y, otherwise known as Millennials or Nexters, a generation that experienced technology and globalisation (Valentine and Powers, 2013).

This study involves youth born since 1995, otherwise known as Generation Z, the digital generation or digital natives (Seemiller and Grace, 2017). They also experienced a global pandemic during their formative years (Deckman *et al.*, 2020; Freeman, Elton and Sipocz, 2023). Gen Z individuals currently make up 21% of the population in the UK and are already entering the workforce (Statista.com, 2024). Having been born into a world of technology, most Gen Z individuals are familiar with harnessing and using technological resources, including new social network platforms such as TikTok and Instagram (Berkup, 2014; Singh and Dangmei, 2016). Social media is an enabler of both social and parasocial relationships (Tsiotsou, 2015) which may inadvertently influence the lives of Gen Z-ers (PrakashYadav and Rai,

2017; Wolf, 2020; Tyson, Kennedy and Funk, 2021). The difference between parasocial interactions and parasocial relationships is that the former refers to a form of appreciation that occurs while viewing whereas the latter refers to a long-term association that extends beyond viewing their media personality, character or characters of choice (Dibble, Hartmann and Rosaen, 2016). Understanding parasocial interactions in young people is important because influences from parasocial relationships established with media characters or fictional personalities have potential impacts on how young people view themselves and the external world (Aytulun and Sunai, 2020). For instance, women who parasocially interact with TV characters may have different expectations about relationships, such as a desire to find a husband similar to the character in the TV series (Batigun and Sunal, 2017).

Although several attempts have been made to evaluate parasocial interactions in young people, none have focused on the influence of these interactions on the lives of Gen Z-ers by using the Rivers of Life approach. On the other hand, few studies employing the Rivers of Life method have focused on parasocial interactions in the overall lives of young people. This study intends to fill the research gap by applying the Rivers of Life method to investigate the influence of parasocial interactions in the lives of Gen Z individuals, in terms of understanding how parasocial interactions affect their personal development, decision-making and life choices in terms of pursuing higher education.

2.0 Methods

2.1 Design

Exploratory study using the Rivers of Life method (Moussa, 2009).

2.2 Setting

Ethics approval was granted by the University of Cumbria Research Ethics Panel on 11th July 2024 (Ref: 23/39). The study was conducted online via Microsoft Teams.

2.3 Eligibility criteria

Inclusion criteria were people of any gender aged between 18 and 28, consistent with the Generation Z age group (Dolot, 2018), who had experienced parasocial interactions, for example, being a fan or follower of media personalities. Parasocial interactions have the potential to influence well-being aspects in people, such as health, social connections and decision-making (Hoffner and Bond, 2022). Therefore, participating in this study may offer potential benefits for participants for self-reflection and introspection. Participants were offered an honorarium of £30 each.

2.4 Recruitment

Study participants from three universities (UK 2, Malaysia 1) were recruited through convenience sampling and reverse snowball sampling strategies. In reverse snowball sampling, enrolled participants are asked to forward study information to potential participants, rather than contact information of potential participants.

2.5 Participants

Eleven participants took part in the study. Eight were from the UK and three were from Malaysia. They were between the ages of 18 and 28 (mean age 22.6 ± 1.8 years), consistent with the Generation Z age group (Dolot, 2018). Concerning gender distribution, five participants self-identified as female, whereas four self-identified as male, and two self-identified as non-binary. All were university students, including two post-graduates.

2.6 Procedure

After providing informed consent, demographic information was collected. Participants attended a Rivers of Life workshop held over Microsoft Teams. The workshop comprised 30 minutes training session and scoping exercise, followed by drawing of the rivers (30 – 45 minutes). During the training session, they were introduced to the Rivers of life method via a Microsoft training presentation, and given information on its use in training and research. The scoping exercise comprised a discussion about the characteristics of a river portraying flows, twists and turns or uncharted events in life, thus enabling participants to identify what their rivers would look like if it were to represent their life story, think about what age their river would start, and describe icons or symbols that could be used to represent different stages, occurrences or experiences in their life. Padlet (https://padlet.com/) was used during the scoping exercise. During the drawing session of the workshop, participants were asked to use the visual metaphor of a river to reflect upon and illustrate details about their real-life journeys involving parasocial interactions addressing ebbs and flows in their lives, including any opportunities or setbacks that they encountered. When they were ready, participants drew their rivers on blank white paper using coloured pencils or pens. When they had finished drawing their rivers, they took a digital photograph of their river and emailed it to the first author. Each river was shared over the Teams call. Participants then presented their rivers individually (5 mins per participant). They also provided feedback or comments on each other's rivers. At the end of the workshop, participants were asked to comment on whether their personal development, decision-making and life choices were influenced by their parasocial interactions with the figure(s) or celebrity(s) of their choice.

3.0 Data analysis

Eleven Rivers of Life drawings were available for analysis using systematic text condensation (Malterud, 2012). Audio recordings from the workshop were transcribed and included in the analysis to identify key themes. Participants' Rivers of Life were studied to describe and translate elements illustrated in the drawings. Consequently, all participants were invited to a feedback session via Microsoft Teams to contribute their thoughts and comment upon the findings as part of the participatory research process.

4.0 Results

Participants reported having formed parasocial interactions with athletes or sports personalities, media personalities, anime and digital or AI-generated personalities, manga, entertainers (pop groups, musicians, singers and actors), and characters from epic fantasy adventure, television series and films (see Table 1). They started developing parasocial interactions at an average age of 10±4 years. Two participants recalled having formed parasocial interactions with characters from Dinosaur King and Thomas the Tank Engine during early childhood. Discussions from the Rivers of Life workshops revealed that some participants were followers, and some were fans of media personalities. An example of a drawing is shown at Figure 1.

Table 1 Parasocial interactions experienced by participants.

Subjects of parasocial interactions	Examples
Athletes or sports personalities	Mark Cavendish, Janja Garnbret, Trent Alexander-Arnold (Liverpool Football Club), Magnus Midtbø, Thierry Gorgiou, Sir Lewis Hamilton
Media personalities or authors	Yogscast, Steve Backshall, Brian Cox, Grian and hermits from HermitCraft, Ashley Neal, Rick Riordan, Terry Pratchett, Technoblade, Philza, GeminiTay
Anime and digital or AI generated personalities	Sonohara Anri from Durarara!!, Terror in Resonance, Dinosaur King
Virtual worlds	Minecraft, ZombieCleo, seasons from HermitCraft
Manga	Spirit Fingers, fear files
Entertainers (pop groups/musicians/singers/actors)	K-pop, Shinee, Bellowhead, Alfa Mist, Bangtan Boys, Taylor Swift, Taemin, Ip

	Man, Jonghyun, Aurora, Paramore, Rope String Band
Characters from epic fantasy adventures, television series and films	Tyrion from Game of Thrones, Kurosawa films, Thomas the Tank Engine, Dr Who

Figure 1 Example of a River of Life drawing.
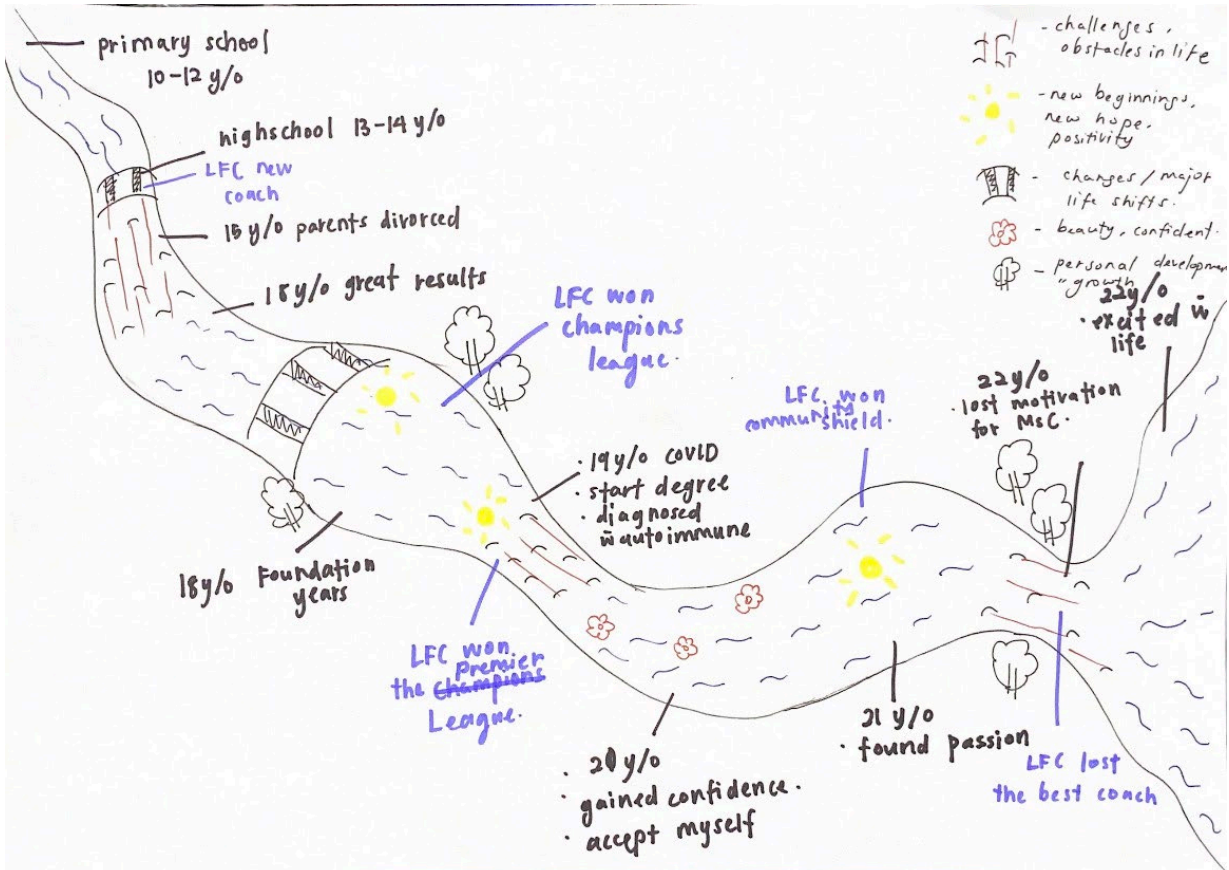
4.1 Themes

Themes that emerged were 'direction in life', 'this is me', 'affected my feelings', 'connecting with others', and 'getting on with it'. They are summarised below, with relevant quotations from those who took part.

Theme 1: 'Direction in life' - why Gen Z-ers are fans or followers

As fans of media personalities or groups, some participants felt having a sense of purpose and support to their lives, including difficult times.

> "When I was a young teenager, I just enjoyed their songs without studying the lyrics, but after I did, I could relate them to my life. For example, one of their song

which is Sea, the whole song is telling about struggle in life in order to achieve your dream."

"..they've worked so hard to achieve where they are now. It helps to motivate me to try my best to achieve what I want in life, personally and professionally"

Another participant shared how they felt motivated to plan their life goals.

"all of the band members have masters degrees, it got me thinking of eventually doing an MSc myself"

"I constantly felt inspired to do things in my life"

One participant said their parasocial interaction had motivated them to learn English as a second language as a result of being involved in fandom at a young age; otherwise they might not have left their home country to come to the United Kingdom.

"I learned English….I cultivated an interest in arts and that led me to take an arts degree and to shows and films I've loved growing up to talk about"

Theme 2: 'This is me' – how Gen Z-ers perceive themselves from their parasocial interactions.

Some participants felt strong connections with the characters whom they had developed parasocial relationships with. One participant saw herself in the female protagonist Woo-yeon from Spirit Fingers, a shy and insecure high-school student who then explores her own identity as she turns 18.

"she's just like me..I felt there were two sides of me"

Being a fan of anime has also brought on a sense of self-acceptance amongst participants.

"yes it has helped me to be comfortable in my own skin"

There was potential influence of parasocial interactions on personality traits and behaviour.

"my personality was definitely shaped somewhat by the fandom spaces and videos though"

"found myself getting outfit inspiration and wanting to emulate something similar with it"

"..majorly affected my humour overall.."

Theme 3: 'Affected my feelings' - socio-emotional connections in Gen Z-ers as a result of parasocial interactions

Participants acknowledged experiencing enjoyment and grief from their parasocial interactions through fandom or similar parasocial activities.

> "I did celebrate their wins and commiserate their loses and still do so in a way they definitely affected my emotional state"

> "I was really impacted by the death of Jonghyun (Shinee member)"

There was also a difference in how participants regarded real life media characters and those generated digitally or artificially.

> "with fictional characters I mostly feel for them, not really relate to them on a personal level as such but for celebrities I have felt and feel strong emotional connections and get inspired"

Theme 4: 'Connecting with others' –friendship through parasocial interactions

They also reported social engagement through common likeness from parasocial interactions. Soccer came up during workshop discussions as an enabler for friendship and people spending time together.

> "we get together to watch the games and enjoy the experience socially together"

Another example of finding friends from parasocial interactions with Minecraft was shared by one participant.

> "I was entrenched in and was around … like a thing that I found like friends through, especially at like turbulent times in my life"

Theme 5: 'Getting on with it' – how Gen Z-ers used parasocial interactions to cope with life stressors

One participant said that reading the Slice of Life genre and action helped her to manage difficult life events. Parasocial interactions helped her to process the emotional turmoil within herself as she was unable to fully express herself outwith.

> "it helps me to cope by living vicariously through them"

When asked whether parasocial interactions influenced their personal development, most participants agreed that parasocial interactions with media figures had indeed played some role in shaping their hobbies and interests.

> "… it (Brian Cox's Wonders of the Solar System) got me into stargazing and astronomy"

> "I feel like the manga/manhua (spirit fingers) helped me overcome my anxieties and raise my self-esteem"

> "my research interests are all related to media I grew up with"

When decision-making and life choices in terms of pursuing higher education were discussed, not everyone attributed influence from parasocial interaction. Most responded that going to university was solely their choice to fulfil their own need for learning and reach their ambitions.

> "not really, went to uni as it's the only way to be a doctor"

> "I don't think so as I have always wanted to go to university"

One participant revealed that they attended university due to parental expectations.

4.2 Dimensions of parasocial relationships following Giles and Maltby (2006)

Data from the Rivers of Life workshop suggested that the dimensions of all of the parasocial relationships were entertainment-social. There was also evidence in the drawings to suggest that parasocial dimensions for two participants overlapped between entertainment-social and intense-personal. None of the drawings showed evidence suggestive of the borderline-pathological dimension of parasocial relationships.

4.3 Rivers of Life experience

The Rivers of Life online workshop was favourably received by all participants. Drawings depicted life events such as changes in household dynamics, friendship and relationships, and transitions from one level of education to another. Symbols used by participants included trees (to represent personal development and growth), arrows (for self-repression), spirals (for disassociation of self), sunshine (to symbolise new beginnings and hope), and fish (as themselves or others). An example of a river with tributaries representing their psychological expansions and personal growth is shown at Figure 2.

Figure 2 Tributaries seen in a River of Life drawing
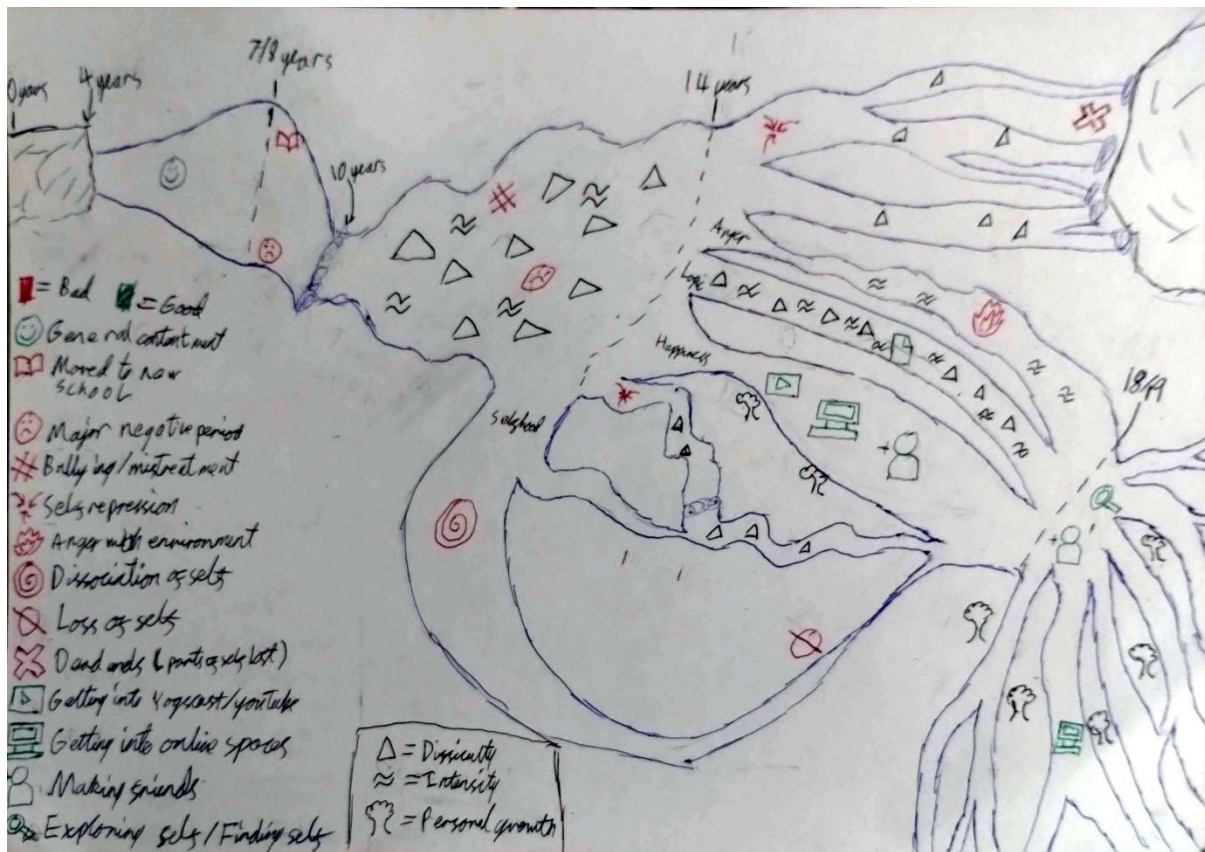
5.0 Discussion and conclusions

Using Rivers of Life enabled us to understand the potential influence of parasocial interactions on the life of Gen Z persons. Drawings of the rivers showed key moments of their lives and displayed their creativity of expression. Furthermore, participants' descriptions of their rivers also highlighted key themes and significance in using symbols to illustrate their lives. Their rivers also portrayed hope for the future.

Young people in Gen Z who enter university to learn, will leave with skills and knowledge that they need to embark on their life journeys. It is plausible that Gen Z individuals may be particularly predisposed towards developing parasocial relationships due to early accessibility to the internet and accompanying social media, compared to previous generations who spent a greater proportion of time in childhood playing outdoors without digital devices (Berkup, 2014). Social media like Facebook, Reddit and Instagram have become an important part of Gen Z life and one of several influences on their behaviour and attitudes (PrakashYadav and Rai, 2017; Higman, 2024). Understanding their parasocial experiences may offer us a valuable perspective on how they have managed to cope with and live their lives.

Our findings showed that fans and followers of Kpop, athletes and musicians were inspired and felt motivated by their personae. They kept up with their social media content alongside their recreational activities and consumed as a coping mechanism. This is consistent with other studies on fandom and parasocial relationships (David *et al.*, 2019; Ascue *et al.*, 2023; Lan, 2024). Fans of Kpop have described their enjoyment of Kpop as a 'reward', and a means to cope with times of stress and chill out (Jenol and Pazil, 2020). Ascue and colleagues (2023) reported positive and negative effects resulting from parasocial interactions between Kpop fans and their idols. The positive effects were fans being inspired, motivated and becoming more productive in their academic or work life whereas the negatives were spending excessively on their idols' merchandise and events (Brown, 2024), sacrificing sleep and academic focus during their engagement as fans (Ascue *et al.*, 2023). Similar to our findings, Kpop fans sought relief from stress and burnout when consuming Kpop content (Ascue *et al.*, 2023).

Rivers of life drawn by our participants reflected social connections. Parasocial interactions with soccer teams, for example, led them to forming friendships whilst sharing triumphs and challenges of soccer matches. The rivers also showed that times spent with new friendship groups simultaneously afforded young people time and space to develop their own interests, following our participants' parasocial interactions with anime, Yogscast, Minecraft and media personalities. Our findings are supported by previous research on parasocial interactions and relationships in social media communities (Blight, 2016; Yuksel, 2016; Leith, 2019). While it is not surprising that people who share the same likes and dislikes are likely to get along well and enjoy each other's company (Yang *et al.*, 2011; Kitts and Leal, 2021), people also display fan group membership to make new friends (Chadborn, Edwards and Reysen, 2017). Parasocial interactions may also be with associated with other activities such as cosplaying (Ramasubramanian and Kornfield, 2012; Tee, 2012; Rouse and Salter, 2021), which in turn, feeds back into parasocial interactions. However, in our study, none of our participants were cosplayers.

Our participants' Rivers of Life illustrated events suggesting periods of having low self-esteem or experiencing unhappiness amongst our participants. Other studies have considered the relationship between low self-esteem, loneliness and identification with media personae or fictional characters (Derrick, Gabriel and Tippin, 2008; Wang, Fink and Cai, 2008; Hu *et al.*, 2022). However, loneliness did not appear to be a strong construct amongst our participants. Previous studies have found that people who were undergoing difficulty in their life or viewed themselves negatively tended to feel higher levels of identification with a media personality or protagonist

(Kaufman, 2009; Hartmann, 2016). We were unable to verify this in our study, but we recognise that having parasocial interactions may be potentially beneficial for people with low self-esteem as a safe route for them to view themselves more positively with very little risk of rejection (Derrick, Gabriel and Tippin, 2008; Madison and Porter, 2015a; Madison, Porter and Greule, 2016). In terms of coping with life stressors, following their favourite media personalities or characters gave young people a sense of purpose essential to all their personal successes, and persistence when they ran into obstacles (Milman and Mills, 2023).

Our intention was to use the Rivers of Life method to explore the influence of parasocial interactions on the lives of Gen Z individuals in terms of their personal development, decision-making and life choices. While the rivers drawn by participants exhibited parasocial interactions at various timelines, discussions at the workshop revealed potential influences of parasocial interactions on shaping some of their behaviours and personality traits. We did not find strong evidence of parasocial interactions having influenced their decision making in terms of pursuing higher education. Nevertheless, our study has potential to raise awareness of parasocial interactions amongst young people to help them view and better understand themselves and their lives (Madison and Porter, 2015b; Bond, 2018). Addressing the impact of parasocial interactions could also be useful to see how it might affect future generations.

5.1 Study limitations

The study has potential limitations. Firstly, the study was impacted by our reliance on reverse snowball sampling methods to reach participants. Initially, recruitment plans were discussed with collaborators, and we relied on their contacts to reach other youth. Coupled with time constraints, it was difficult to reach other Gen Z individuals that may exist who would be willing to take part, but did not get included in our study. Our ability to gain access to a wider scope of participants was restricted. The availability of potential participants to attend the Rivers of Life workshop also affected the study. Despite thirty expressions of interest, only eleven were able to participate. Therefore, we interpret our findings with caution as it may be challenging to apply them to Gen Z persons more widely.

5.2 Thoughts for the future

Although the current study identified five themes related to parasocial interactions from the Rivers of Life drawings, deeper aspects from these themes were not fully evaluated. A full discussion of parasocial interactions impacting upon the lives of Gen Z individuals is beyond the scope of this study. For example, why some people experienced stronger parasocial interactions than others or the impact of social media strategies on increasing parasocial engagement. Future work could focus on the degree of influence from selected parasocial interactions on young people to build upon knowledge promoting the well-being, coherent and future prospects for young people's lives.

Acknowledgements

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