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Belle: An Animated Film That Reflects Today's Parasocial Phenomenon

Online culture has become more saturated in recent years because of the pandemic and the growth of online content; there are more people on the internet than ever before. The quarantine isolation many have felt during lockdown made people more desperate to find meaningful relationships. I turned to online content to feel less alone during quarantine as did many of my friends. Because of the need for relationships, parasocial relationships have been on the rise even after the lockdown. A parasocial relationship is when a person feels like they're in a real relationship with a mass media personality. It's most common with celebrities or influencers. A person is in this kind of relationship when they feel connected with a person because of their online content. They have never talked to or met this person in real life but they feel a genuine relationship with them because of their videos, interviews, music, live streams, etc. This is a problem because basing a relationship solely on someone's online content doesn't mean you truly know who they are, nor does the other know who you are. The 2021 animated film *Belle*, is about a country girl who becomes a popular online singer. Suzu Naito, the protagonist of the film, begins to show her true talent after joining "U", an app that allows people to lead online lives in virtual avatars. Throughout the film, she finds it hard to balance her virtual and real life. Though she has millions of adoring fans, none of them know her real struggles. She faces difficulty online and offline with relationships. The film *Belle* undoubtedly demonstrates the struggles of online parasocial relationships.

Belle is a 2021 film by well-known director Mamoru Hosada who is known to work with stories based in reality and the virtual world. In the film, Suzu Naito is a high schooler who lives with her father in rural Japan. After her friend sends her an invite to the app "U", she creates her virtual avatar which she names Belle. The app uses your online info to create an alternate version



Movie Poster for *Belle* 2021

of yourself that reflects what you look like online. Immediately, she uses it to escape her boring life for “a place where she is beautiful and can sing” (Naudus). Suzu, aka Belle, becomes an overnight sensation and gains millions of followers instantly after her first performance. Suzu begins to sing her songs for her fans and becomes happier in the virtual world. Keeping your real identity a secret is poignant throughout the film. Online, Suzu forms a friendship with “The Dragon”, a reclusive beast-like avatar that is being hunted by vigilantes of “U”. In real life, she struggles with her small-town life and her family relationship. Navigating her online and real-life relationships is the challenge she goes through most of the film. It gradually becomes harder to hide her persona as she grows in popularity. The film is certainly inspired by *Beauty and the Beast* with Belle and “The Dragon”. The fantasy and whimsy of the original Disney classic adds to the imaginative world of “U” where anything seems possible. The film takes us through Suzu’s experience as Belle, a virtual pop star, and a country girl who struggles with her past and being herself. On one side, many of us can relate to how Suzu feels in real life. On the other side, her stardom online gives us the perspective of mass media personalities who many people feel like they have a relationship with.

A parasocial relationship starts with an online personality that gains the attention of fans. *Belle* displays this clearly when she explodes in popularity for her short song performance. Suzu’s “first performance quickly goes viral, with the clip spreading rapidly and her phone blowing up with notifications” while she’s at school (Naudus). Within a couple of days, Suzu has millions of followers who have become connected to her through her music. Charles Solomon takes a look at Suzu’s character and symbolism in his *New York Times* article. He describes her as “the reigning pop diva of the cyberworld of U” (Solomon). Suzu even takes the spot of

another virtual singer after her rise in fame. In this case, *Belle* has succeeded in showing the starting point of people's fascination with her. From then on, Suzu has to learn the hard way what it means to be an online celebrity.

In the online space, it is easier for fans to interact with you because of messaging. This makes it even more possible for some fans to unrealistically feel close to their idol. Suzu has millions of followers online; all of them only know her as Belle. During the movie, being famous becomes overwhelming to her as she navigates a relationship online with "The Dragon" whom she is trying to help. As she grows closer to Dragon, she doesn't perform for her fans. This sparks a massive wave of messages asking Belle where she is, what her relationship with Dragon is, and saying that they miss her. Jessica Grose explains 'parasocial relationships' in her *New York Times* article as a "one-way friendship"; an "illusion of friendship between spectator and performer" (Grose). In Suzu's case, she is a singer and many of her followers feel connected to her through her music, much like real-life. Throughout the film, her fans become increasingly aggressive in terms of wanting her to perform again. At the same time, she wants to help Dragon. We need to realize that there are real people behind every account living their own lives. When we don't, it creates an unrealistic mindset just like Suzu's fans. No matter how large you are online, these kinds of fans can be found anywhere.

Parasocial relationships can happen at any level of online fame, it becomes unhealthy at any stage. *Belle* captures how overwhelming it can be, especially in an age where most people use social media. It's difficult for Suzu to create distance with fans after giving so much to them. Near the climax of the movie, a sea of fans swarms Belle and she struggles to break free. They were all demanding and pleading for her to sing for them after she left the online space for a few days. We can see a similar kind of online attachment in anyone who has a media following. Otegha Uwagba, a writer with a small online following, describes her own experience with a parasocial relationship in her article. It builds up from small, nice messages to constant requests or one-sided conversations. Uwagba eventually blocked this fan because the messages got to an unbearable limit. The writer had "fallen victim to the consequences of a parasocial relationship. The term describes people forming intense – and crucially, one-sided – attachments to celebrities

or public figures” (Uwagba). At any level of online fame, people can become overly attached. Even being the largest singer online still means Suzu experiences parasocial relationships. Both Suzu and Uwagba felt the overwhelming pressure to interact with their fans. Some fans even become physically aggressive by stalking and finding personal information. The attachment people get to online personalities has become intense in the last few years. All kinds of media personalities experience it no matter how large their following is.

Unfortunately, *Belle* shows parasocial relationships that happen exceptionally quickly. She gained fame almost overnight and didn't feel the gradual build-up of fan comments. The movie also didn't have a specific scene to show when one fan gets overly close to the celebrity, which is the case in most parasocial relationships. It also doesn't give us specific comments from her fans that could seem unhealthy. The plot does not revolve around parasocial relationships it revolves around Suzu's life. The director of *Belle* states, “what we tried to do in ‘Belle’ is not build a character, but build a person: someone who reflects the society in which we live” (Hosada qtd. in Solomon). The goal of the film was to show what kinds of society we live in today, not solely focusing on parasocial relationships. The film overall shows parasocial relationships as a consequence of online fame, rather than it being the focus of the movie.

At the end of the film, Suzu successfully helps Dragon. Not as Belle, however, as her true self. Only with the help of her family and friends and her own courage does she push herself to do the right thing. Online friends won't be able to help you in dangerous real-life situations. *Belle* undoubtedly demonstrates the struggles of online parasocial relationships. It reflects the society we live in today where many people find entertainment online. Younger generations today can relate to the online culture in the film that hides the truth of online relationships. Suzu feels the pressure to keep singing for her fans, their persistent messages create anxiety within her. She loves to sing virtually as Belle to escape her boring life but also wants to help people in real life. Between Belle, the online singer, and Suzu Naito, an average high school student, there are friendships. The balance between online and real-life relationships is tested in the film which brilliantly shows which is more important.

Works Cited

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Jessica Ebenstein Grose received an education at Brown University, writes for the *New York Times*, and is an American journalist, editor, and novelist. She has written several novels including the 2012 novel *Sad Desk Salad*, *Brilliant Messages from Home*, and 2016's *Soulmates: A Novel*. Grose mainly writes about parenting, issues facing women, and contemporary culture. With this information, we can discern that Grose's audience is usually young adults to adults who may be parents. Since Grose is also a novelist, her audience not only reads *New York Times* articles but also books. As she is a mother of two, her point of view comes from the parent. Grose's point of view for most of her articles deals with the problems women and young parents face. The article was written in 2021 when the pandemic was ongoing. Quarantine has, by now, been associated with hours spent online and little to no interaction with people. As 2021 came along, the increase in media usage didn't dwindle. The time invested in social media during the pandemic continues, in 2021 people were still fixated on it. This is important for my paper because parasocial relationships are born through the internet. More time spent online means more opportunities to become invested in people you've never met. This article is crucial to my argument because it describes how adults are creating relationships with people online. It clearly discusses how parasocial relationships enter our everyday lives.

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Kris Naudus is an editor for Engadget's buyer's guide. According to her about page on Engadget, "Her work has also appeared on Yahoo, Anime Insider, Anime News Network and The

Escapist, as well as a lengthy stint writing and editing things for The Pokémon Company” (Engadget). Naudus usually writes about gaming equipment online gaming culture, and media films. From this information, her audience is most likely young adults who participate in gaming culture and are interested in gaming equipment. They may also enjoy watching the kinds of media films that she writes about. Naudus sees from the consumer/buyer perspective. The purpose of her article about *Belle* is to explain the representation of parasocial relationships in the film. Naudus sees this issue from the same standpoint as someone watching the film. She also understands gaming and online culture which is relevant to the setting and storytelling in the film, Naudus has witnessed this kind of relationship in our online spaces. The article was written the same year the movie was released, giving a recent opinion on the film. The article was also written during the pandemic which was the catalyst that drove an increase in online usage. The timing of the film’s release in January 2021 and the publishing of this article is a good time frame for delving into the issue of parasocial relationships. This article analyzes my cultural object and directly explains how the film portrays parasocial relationships.

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