

## IDENTIFYING WITH ARABIC JOURNALISTS

How Al-Jazeera Tapped Parasocial Interaction Gratifications in the Arab World

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**Abstract** / Al-Jazeera typifies the West's perception of the new Arab satellite news channel. Seemingly rising from out of nowhere, the fledgling Al-Jazeera satellite news channel took a western-style cable news format and adapted it to the cultural perspectives of a Middle Eastern audience. As a result, it has become one of the most popular news channels with people in the Middle East and Arab expatriates around the world. One reason for this popularity may be the result of audiences identifying with their favorite news personalities on the network – possibly even developing a mock-interpersonal relationship with them. This 'parasocial interaction' may be linked to viewing levels, perceptions of the network as credible and a number of motives for watching the channel. To test these possibilities, the authors surveyed over 5300 Al-Jazeera users during a two-week period in 2002. They found strong evidence that parasocial interaction is related to amount of time spent with the channel and belief in the network's credibility.

**Keywords** / Al-Jazeera / Arab world / parasocial interaction / satellite news

As a result of tragic events in recent years ranging from stepped up violence in the Palestinian and Israeli dispute to the September 11 destruction of the World Trade Center and the subsequent US-led 'War on Terror', Al-Jazeera TV – professed to be one of the only non-state-run satellite news channels in the Arab world – has come to the forefront of world consciousness. Since its beginnings, and especially after the Gulf War in the 1990s, Al-Jazeera has been 'must see TV' for millions of Arabs living in the Middle East and abroad.

We were interested in exploring this relationship between Al-Jazeera and its audience. In 2002, executives of Al-Jazeera placed a link on the network's website ([www.aljazeera.net](http://www.aljazeera.net)) to an online survey we produced in Arabic that asked viewers about their viewing habits and demographics. During a two-week period in late August and early September, we obtained over 5300 responses from Arabic readers with Internet access in 137 countries around the world.

Over the years, a number of articles have looked at Arab media and their audiences. None, however, have considered the influence of parasocial interaction (PSI), the pseudo interpersonal relationship that audience members develop with media personalities. PSI has been found to be related to audience viewing levels and even reasons for watching a program. We wondered if this would hold true in the case of the Al-Jazeera audience, particularly since the

network broke from traditional Arab news formats by adopting a broadcast style similar to western news outlets, which address viewers in a more 'personal' way and hold their attention with short, concise reporting, fast-paced editing and visually appealing graphics.

## **Traditional Arab Television News**

What is commonly known as the 'Arab world' is a region that stretches from the shores of the Atlantic to the Persian Gulf. Most countries in the region have lagged about 20 years behind the West in developing and distributing broadcast content (Boyd, 1999). In the 1970s, television systems in the Arab world were constrained by major problems. Financial woes and shortages of trained personnel, coupled with close government scrutiny, resulted in dull, low quality regional programming. Insufficient program production led to importation of western content, much of which was highly censored (Ayish, 2001). Until the rise of satellite media and Internet access, audiences were limited to their governments' programming – with the exception of short-wave radio broadcasts from networks such as the BBC and Voice of America.

News on these predominantly state-run television channels has been – even until recently – characterized as particularly lackluster and consisting of 'protocol news' heavily laden with government propaganda and often consisting of unedited video footage of state events – without even audio commentary (Ayish, 2001; Boyd, 1999). Television's visual potential was used in a very limited way and news packages not at all (Sakr, 2000). Newsgathering and reporting – as defined in the western sense – were not central to the government-run newscast model. The primary purposes of such news organizations were to promote the agenda of the national government and to filter any incoming foreign news (Rugh, 1979).

In the 1980s, however, advances in satellite and telecommunication technologies gave rise to a direct broadcast satellite (DBS) revolution in the region (Boyd, 1999). Arabs both rich and poor obtained satellite dishes (even in countries where they were banned), and used them to tap into global media satellite broadcasts that were beyond the direct control of their countries' governments (Alterman, 1998; Marghalani et al., 1998). Faced with the competition from international television news that had been so carefully censored in the past, Arab governments determined that it would be better to compete by creating their own satellite channels or by bringing their broadcast operations over to DBS. The new benefit – and challenge – to state-run Arab media was that their signals would now reach the entire region and ultimately be available worldwide. The era of transnational Arab news channels was born – a phenomenon that promised to disturb power dynamics and public opinion in the region (Kraidy, 1998).

Although government-run television had now achieved the technology to get their message on the same dish as their global competitors, their television news was still predominantly used for propaganda (Amin and Boyd, 1993). Most investment was in technologies, but some channels began to establish networks of reporters and correspondents (Ghareeb, 2000). As a result, many

Arab viewers began to see several types of direct broadcast channels available on their satellite dishes – those that belonged directly to their home government, broadcasts from other governments, and ones considered to be privately controlled. The face of Arab television news was changing, and at the forefront of this change was Al-Jazeera Television.

## **Al-Jazeera and its Audience**

In November 1996, Al-Jazeera was introduced in Qatar as the first Arab all-news and public affairs satellite channel (Bahry, 2001; el'Nawawy and Iskandar, 2002). Although initially funded by the Qatari government – with only a small amount of revenue coming from advertisers and subscribers – the network has grown by leaps and bounds (Bahry, 2001). Al-Jazeera quickly became the most popular television news channel of Arab peoples in the region and worldwide, stealing Arab television audiences from every one of the big television powers in the region (Friedman, 2001). Few in the West had heard of Al-Jazeera, which operates from cramped and heavily fortified studios in the outskirts of Doha. But when the station started broadcasting video statements by Osama bin Laden and became the only foreign network to broadcast from inside Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, its name became familiar throughout the world. In 2001, the network had an estimated 40 million viewers, including 150,000 Americans (Bahry, 2001). After the start of the US-led war with Iraq, Al-Jazeera saw its European subscriber numbers double almost overnight (Cozens, 2003).

Al-Jazeera's popularity was due in part to several major breaks from the formatting of traditional Arab television news programming: a more objective, dual approach to news coverage; more video of events and the people affected; and a much greater reliance on regularly featured anchors and reporters – all characteristics of the BBC and other western media on which it was modeled. Western-trained newscasters and producers utilize video and slick graphics and emphasize fast-paced, sleek deliveries on the part of anchors and regularly featured correspondents. Whenever possible, videos – often live – of events and the people they happen to are emphasized (Ayish, 2001, 2002). The network also features many talk shows that cover controversial topics, invite guests of varying opinions and are hosted by regular personalities (Ayish, 2002; el'Nawawy and Iskandar, 2002). Programs and news shows such as these have led Al-Jazeera to captivate a growing number of viewers and the network has soared in popularity in a region accustomed to state-controlled news (CNN, 2001).

Who are the Al-Jazeera viewers? A difficult question to answer, but with our online survey in 2002 we were able to obtain a global snapshot of some of them – the ones with Internet access. It is important to point out that Internet access varies widely in the Arab world and among Arab expatriates. Our online survey was written in Arabic and included questions regarding characteristics such as age, gender, marital status, religion, philosophy of life, education, income, country of birth, country of residence and, of course, how much time they spend using Al-Jazeera's channel and website.

We obtained usable survey replies for 5379 individuals ranging in age between 18 and over 65. Nearly half were between 25 and 35 ( $N = 2378$ , 44.2 percent) with the next largest group ranging from 18 to 24 years old ( $N = 1428$ , 26.5 percent). Men ( $N = 4948$ , 92 percent) outnumbered women ( $N = 430$ , 8 percent) in this sample by 10 to 1. The group was nearly equally split between single ( $N = 2435$ , 45.3 percent) and married ( $N = 2847$ , 52.9 percent) with virtually no divorces or widowed spouses reported. The overwhelming majority practiced the Muslim faith ( $N = 5192$ , 96.5 percent). Half of the respondents considered themselves to have a moderate philosophy of life ( $N = 2693$ , 50.1 percent), while about one-quarter of the group considered themselves somewhat or very liberal ( $N = 1423$ , 26.4 percent) or alternatively somewhat or very conservative ( $N = 1262$ , 23.5 percent). Almost two-thirds of respondents had obtained the equivalent of a four-year college degree or greater ( $N = 3507$ , 65.2 percent), while nearly one-third had completed the equivalent of a high school degree and possibly some college ( $N = 1595$ , 29.7 percent). The majority of the participants had an annual household income equivalent to less than US\$15,000 ( $N = 1931$ , 35.9 percent), while another 30.4 percent ( $N = 1633$ ) made between US\$15,000 and US\$35,000 per year.

The results suggest that the majority of our sample represented a philosophical cross-section of a relatively young, well-educated, financially stable segment of the Islamic male population. Despite the many similarities in our group, survey responses hailed from 137 individual countries around the world. At the time of the study, 70.3 percent ( $N = 3782$ ) of the entire sample lived in the 'Arab world' – nations where the predominant language is Arabic (Hejleh, 2001). Table 1 represents a breakdown of these respondents by the Middle Eastern nation they lived in.

About a quarter of the overall sample lived in Saudi Arabia ( $N = 1215$ , 22.6 percent) at the time they responded to the survey. The next largest group of respondents lived in the US ( $N = 386$ , 7.2 percent). Interestingly, only 106 respondents (2 percent) resided in Qatar, Al-Jazeera's home. Nearly all responses were from individuals who had been born in one of the 22 Arab world nations ( $N = 4972$ , 92.4 percent). Slightly over half ( $N = 2879$ , 53.5 percent) of the sample lived in the country they were originally from, while the remainder lived abroad ( $N = 2500$ , 46.5 percent).

Many of these people reported spending a lot of time watching Al-Jazeera – or at least leaving it on in the background while attending to other tasks. Figure 1 represents the average amount of time spent watching Al-Jazeera per day.

Clearly, the majority of our sample watch a lot of Al-Jazeera television, but what are the motivations behind this? In understanding how and why viewers use the channel, it is important to first review studies of Arab audience use of and gratifications from television.

The uses and gratifications model can help to explain why people choose a certain media, how they use the media and what outcomes they feel they have gained from the experience. The presumption is of an active and aware audience that evaluates media for their potential ability to meet predetermined needs (Blumler, 1979; Palmgreen et al., 1980, 1981). Audiences have the capability of making up their own minds about the messages being sent by media,

TABLE 1

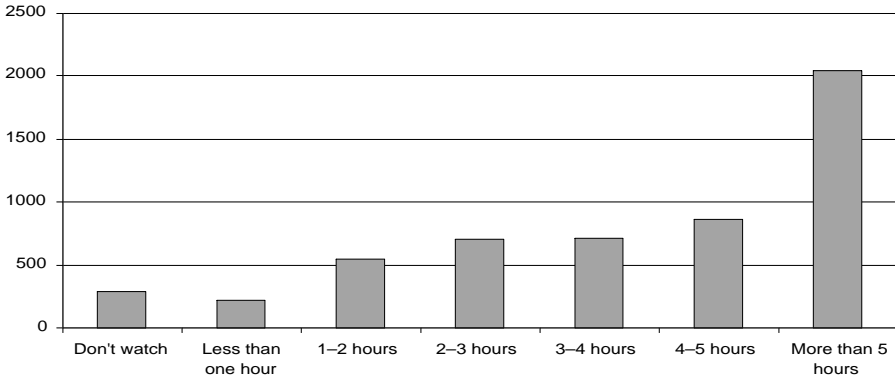
**Number of Respondents Living in Arab Nations**

Country	Number of Respondents Living in Arab World	Percentage of Total Sample
Algeria	124	2.3
Bahrain	107	2.0
Comoros	0	0.0
Djibouti	0	0.0
Egypt	238	4.4
Iraq	30	0.6
Jordan	304	5.7
Kuwait	151	2.8
Lebanon	94	1.7
Libya	103	1.9
Mauritania	58	1.1
Morocco	135	2.5
Oman	109	2.0
Palestinian Territories	206	3.8
Qatar	106	2.0
Saudi Arabia	1215	22.6
Somalia	2	0.0
Sudan	69	1.3
Syria	268	5.0
Tunisia	27	0.5
United Arab Emirates	356	6.6
Yemen	80	1.5
Total	3782	70.3

Total sample: 5379 respondents living in 137 countries worldwide.

and the extent of their gratification by the media depends on the cultural and social origins of their needs (McQuail et al., 1972). They choose what they want to watch or believe from the news and programs, and then they determine whether the programs are fulfilling the gratifications they sought. There are a relatively limited number of studies that have attempted to investigate media use by Arab audiences. Many of the studies focus on audience perceptions of media credibility as well as gratifications obtained from that usage (Abduljaleel, 1994; Abdulrahim, 1999; Abouzinada, 1988; Al-Amoudi, 1990; Al-Attibi, 1986; Al-Habib, 1995; Al-Heezan, 1993; Al-Makaty et al., 1994; Al-Oofy, 1990; Al-Shaqsi, 2000; Boyd, 1972; Marghalani et al., 1998; Merdad, 1993; Najai, 1982; Yousef, 1999).

As with western television viewers, this research suggests that a number of gratifications are interrelated in the reasoning behind Arab audience television use. Do audiences identify with the gender, education, or philosophical attitude of anchors, reporters and guests? Does watching the programming reinforce a

**FIGURE 1****Average Amount of Time Respondents Spend Watching Al-Jazeera**

sense of group identity? If so, then Al-Jazeera may have tapped into the phenomenon known as parasocial interaction.

## Parasocial Interaction

'Parasocial interaction' (PSI) was first defined by Horton and Wohl in 1956. They described the apparent face-to-face interaction between media personalities (both real people and fictional characters) and audience members as parasocial – similar to interpersonal social interaction but not the same. With interpersonal communication, there is a constant back and forth as both participants are senders and receivers of information. When a viewer watches a television program, the personalities in the program communicate information about themselves in their behavior and appearance. However, any reaction to this by the viewer is not sent back directly to the program character and thus the character has no opportunity to respond to the viewer.

Despite the essentially one-way nature of PSI, researchers believe that parasocial relationships evolve over time, much like their interpersonal counterparts (Horton and Wohl, 1956). As in a face-to-face relationship, viewers will increase or decrease their exposure to a television personality depending upon how much they like him or her. Audience members make this evaluation by drawing conclusions about a personality's behavior from his or her media exposure and then comparing that to the characteristics one likes and dislikes about people in general. The perceived behavior of a persona during each media event (e.g. newscast, commercial, talk show interview) helps the viewer to form an opinion about him or her, which the viewer then carries into the next parasocial event (Horton and Wohl, 1956; Perse and Rubin, 1989). This evaluation appears to be based on several interrelated characteristics, including interest in the personality, identification with the personality, agreement with the way the personality handles problems and identification with the personality's group of

friends (Auter, 1992; Auter and Palmgreen, 2000; Horton and Wohl, 1956; Nordlund, 1978; Rosengren and Windahl, 1972).

Although frequently studied in the context of fictional programming, PSI has also been found to be an important gratification sought and obtained by audiences of broadcast news and public affairs programming (e.g. Houlberg, 1984; Levy, 1979; Mancini, 1988; Palmgreen et al., 1980; Perse, 1990; Rubin et al., 1985; Rubin and Step, 2000; Tsao, 1996; Wenner, 1983). Perse has suggested that parasocial relationships grow out of instrumental uses of the media as a 'side effect' of or bonus to the initial gratification sought. During the television viewing process, audience members acquire knowledge about the news personality, feel good about how the newscasters 'help' them to meet their needs, and relate their credibility to – among other things – their perceived sociability (Perse, 1990). Mancini (1988) proposed a range of 'interactional strategies and devices' that exist as components of western-style newscasts and, in his estimation, would increase the likelihood that parasocial relationships would develop with viewers. In fact, it has often been pointed out that appearance, personality and storytelling technique are key reasons for executives to select certain newscasters – traits and abilities designed to appeal to a viewer's sociability needs (e.g. Auletta, 1991; Bogart, 1980; Kearns, 1999; Kerbel, 2001; Matusow, 1983; Rubin et al., 1985).

While PSI has not been studied in the past with Arab media audiences, a number of hypotheses and research questions can be devised based on prior PSI studies of western audiences as well as research that looks into the motivations of the Arab media user. We chose to look into several PSI-related questions. PSI was measured using Auter and Palmgreen's (2000) Audience–Persona Interaction (API) Scale. The 22-item survey taps four parasocial issues that have been discussed and predicted in prior research – identification with favorite personality; interest in favorite personality; liking favorite personality's problem-solving ability; and identification and interaction with the group of personalities featured (Horton and Wohl, 1956; Nordlund, 1978; Rosengren and Windahl, 1972). Due to concerns by the Institutional Review Board of the host academic institution, one item from the API Scale was deleted from this study. Although relatively new, the API Scale has been utilized with good success in a number of recent studies (Auter and Lane, 1999; Crouch, 2002; Lewis, 1994; Reynolds and Reynolds, 2002). We looked at the following hypothesis and research questions:

*Hypothesis 1:* Parasocial interaction (PSI) will be positively related to amount of time spent using Al-Jazeera media – both television and website.

Viewing levels were determined from responses to two questions: amount of time spent watching Al-Jazeera on the average weekday and amount of time spent watching Al-Jazeera on the average Saturday or Sunday. Weekday scores were weighted by 5 and weekend scores by 2. The results were summed and divided by 7 to result in average daily viewing scores. The same type of questions were asked about how much time respondents spent using Al-Jazeera's website.

Results showed that there was a small but strongly significant relationship between the amount of time spent using Al-Jazeera television and web and parasocial interaction (see Table 2). Although the relationship was positive both

TABLE 2

**Usage of Al-Jazeera TV and Website and Audience PSI\***

Use	PSI	<i>r</i>
Combined use of TV and website	API Scale overall	.255
	Group identification	.249
	Interest in favorite personality	.221
	Liking of favorite personality's problem-solving skills	.222
	Identification with favorite personality	.198
Al-Jazeera TV use	API Scale overall	.281
	Group identification	.266
	Interest in favorite personality	.260
	Liking of favorite personality's problem-solving skills	.245
	Identification with favorite personality	.210
Al-Jazeera website use	API Scale overall	.215
	Group identification	.236
	Interest in favorite personality	.155
	Liking of favorite personality's problem-solving skills	.157
	Identification with favorite personality	.190

\*All results significant at  $p < .001$ .

overall and regarding various subsets of the PSI scale, the strongest links were between PSI and television viewing – particularly feeling a part of a group. PSI appears to be a significant part of the reason for using Al-Jazeera media, especially television.

Some researchers have suggested that parasocial interaction is used as a functional alternative to social interaction events, however little evidence has been found to support this proposition (e.g. Levy, 1979; Nordlund, 1978; Rosengren et al., 1976; Rubin et al., 1985). One might suspect that a person that has traveled outside his or her regular environment would seek out familiar programming to fill in the gap in their social calendar. Sampedro (1998) has suggested that expatriates will watch programming local to their home (when available) to generate parasocial interaction and increase their level of comfort. Tsao (1996) has posed two conflicting positions concerning PSI. In the case of the deficiency paradigm, PSI is a functional alternative for social interaction. However, in the global-use paradigm PSI is simply a universal experience sought whether interpersonal interactions are lacking or not. Research into the relationship between PSI and social or cultural relational maintenance has raised the following research question:

*Research Question 1:* For people originally from the Arab world, will PSI levels differ between those now living elsewhere and those who still live in the region?

Given that PSI might be an alternative to day-to-day interpersonal relationships, we were curious about how people originally from the Arab world who lived outside their home region would react to Al-Jazeera, compared to those who still lived in the region. We performed an independent  $t$ -test to compare mean scores of the Arab respondents still living in an Arab nation ( $N = 3690$ ) with those that did not ( $N = 1282$ ).  $t$ -test analysis revealed significant differences on the total API Scale –  $t(4891) = 3.13, p = .002$ , but in the reverse of what we expected. People living inside the Middle East ( $N = 3631, M = 3.57$ ) scored significantly higher on the API Scale than did those living outside the region ( $N = 1262, M = 3.49$ ). This was an interesting finding since one might assume that people living outside the region would use Al-Jazeera as a functional alternative to day-to-day interpersonal relationships with people from their community. Instead, it appears that audiences in the Middle East watch Al-Jazeera as a complement to their interpersonal relationships, lending support to the global-use paradigm.

*Research Question 2:* How will demographic characteristics relate to PSI levels?

We found several interesting differences in PSI levels based on demographic characteristics. Younger respondents (18–24 years old) had significantly higher PSI levels with Al-Jazeera than did older respondents –  $F(5,5286) = 10.62, p < .001$ . There also appears to be a relationship between education level and PSI with Al-Jazeera –  $F(7, 5284) = 23.88, p < .001$ . The more educated respondents were, the less likely they were to parasocially interact with personalities on Al-Jazeera. This relationship was also true of income level –  $F(8,5283) = 10.66, p < .001$ . The more money a respondent made, the less likely they were to have strong PSI with Al-Jazeera personalities. Single people ( $N = 2387, M = 3.60$ ) had a greater PSI with Al-Jazeera characters than did married respondents ( $N = 2810, M = 3.49$ ) –  $t(5195) = 4.94, p < .001$ . Although Muslim and Christian respondents scored similarly on PSI, Muslims ( $N = 5111, M = 3.55$ ) had much stronger PSI with Al-Jazeera characters than did Jewish respondents ( $N = 9, M = 2.80$ ) and those with other religious affiliations ( $N = 45, M = 3.21$ ) –  $F(3,5287) = 7.68, p < .001$ . Responses to the API Scale were significantly different dependent upon respondents' social philosophy –  $F(4,5286) = 21.25, p < .001$ . People who considered themselves extremely liberal had the strongest PSI with their favorite Al-Jazeera personality. PSI grew progressively weaker the more conservative a respondent considered him- or herself.

What type of picture does this paint overall? It would seem that those most seriously linked to Al-Jazeera in terms of PSI are younger, lower income, limited education Muslims who consider themselves very liberal-minded in their life philosophy. Most audience members clearly like Al-Jazeera, some more so than others. But does this PSI translate into increased believability or a perception of Al-Jazeera as credible?

## Credibility

Only a few studies have looked at a possible link between PSI and source credibility – and those have found a positive relationship (Bickel, 2003; Sparks,

2001). In addition to those studies, research on parasocial interaction has pointed out how increased PSI is correlated to increased believability/perceptions of reality (Perse, 1990; Rubin and Perse, 1987; Rubin et al., 1985) and adoption of thoughts and ideas espoused by media personalities (Basil, 1996). Research has shown that prestige, entertainment value and showmanship can contribute to audience perceptions of source credibility (Burgoon et al., 1990; Fischhoff, 1996; Markham, 1968; McCain et al., 1977). Based on these findings, we developed the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2:* PSI will be positively correlated with audience perceptions of Al-Jazeera's credibility.

In our survey, we measured audience perception of a personality's credibility with 15 of 16 items developed for the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) to study newspaper credibility (MORI Research Inc., 1985). One question regarding 'patriotism' was left out because we felt it did not fit with the study of credibility of a non-state-run media outlet.

As we suspected, we found a strong positive relationship between PSI and audience perceptions of the credibility of Al-Jazeera news professionals ( $r = .451, p < .001$ ). As with the first hypothesis, group identification/interaction ( $r = .455, p < .001$ ) appears to have played the greatest role in this relationship. Liking their favorite persona's problem-solving ability ( $r = .400, p < .001$ ); identification with favorite persona ( $r = .361, p < .001$ ); and interest in favorite persona ( $r = .346, p < .001$ ) contributed as well, but to a lesser extent.

## Instrumental and Ritualistic Media Use

A number of researchers have looked into the differences between habitual and goal-oriented media use (Hawkins and Pingree, 1981; Windahl, 1981). However, Alan Rubin is credited with the formal coining of 'ritualistic and instrumental' uses of television (Rubin, 1984). Ritualistic use has been characterized by desires to relax, for companionship and to pass time, while instrumental use tends to be for goal-directed gratification such as information seeking (Rubin, 1984).

Rubin et al. (1985) have linked PSI with instrumental use of television news for information gathering because they believe that a relationship develops as an outgrowth of the repeated viewing of a specific newscaster. Social interaction has been considered another goal-directed use of the media (Leung, 2001). Companionship, arousal and even social interaction have been identified as characteristics of ritualistic media use (Leung, 2001; Rubin, 1984); it would seem logical that PSI would also be correlated with increased ritualistic use of a particular program. This leads to our third hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 3a:* PSI will be positively linked with instrumental uses of Al-Jazeera media.

*Hypothesis 3b:* PSI will be positively linked with ritualistic uses of Al-Jazeera media.

Usage motivations were obtained using a portion of Ganahl's (1994) gratifications scale. Respondents replied with their level of agreement to 12 items that Ganahl found to tap two gratification variables: surveillance and social

integration. The surveillance motives are representative of an instrumental need for news and information, while the social integration motives reflect ritualistic usage of the channel.

Instrumental use of Al-Jazeera, as measured by surveillance motives (Ganahl, 1994) was found to be positively related to PSI ( $r = .440, p < .001$ ). Group identification/interaction ( $r = .432, p < .001$ ) once again showed the strongest link; followed by problem-solving ability ( $r = .404, p < .001$ ); interest in favorite persona ( $r = .374, p < .001$ ); and identification with favorite persona ( $r = .338, p < .001$ ).

While a positive correlation was found between PSI and instrumental viewing of Al-Jazeera, an even stronger link was found to ritualistic use as measured by social integration motives from Ganahl's (1994) scale ( $r = .570, p < .001$ ). Group identification/interaction ( $r = .569, p < .001$ ) showed the strongest relationship; followed by problem-solving ability ( $r = .501, p < .001$ ); identification with favorite persona ( $r = .463, p < .001$ ); and interest in favorite persona ( $r = .454, p < .001$ ).

## Discussion

Our results suggest that – in many respects – Middle Eastern and western audiences react similarly to their favorite news channel and the personalities it features. While PSI has been linked to instrumental usage (e.g. Rubin et al., 1985), it appears that a cyclical effect may result where PSI leads to increased usage that then results in stronger PSI, which results in greater consumption and so on. This may suggest that PSI is an outgrowth of that use or related to the instrumental motivation of increasing socialization – basically becoming an aware, informed member of society that can discuss current events with family, neighbors and co-workers. Perhaps more importantly though, we found PSI to be strongly linked to ritualistic use of Al-Jazeera as well. This could add weight to the suggestion that PSI is not used as a functional alternative to socialization but rather as a supplement to it.

In the group surveyed, PSI appears to be clearly linked not only to television program consumption, but also to network website use. While researchers have never suggested that PSI is limited to the more interpersonal-like broadcast media, little is known about PSI and website use. Usage seemed to be particularly strongly linked with feeling like one is a member of the group. In this part of the world where western-style journalism is minimal, Al-Jazeera may provide a feeling of group cohesiveness that we tend to take for granted in the West. Not surprisingly, audience interest in their favorite anchor/reporter and liking that personality's problem-solving abilities had a strong effect as well.

Particularly in news, audience perceptions of credibility are critical to the success of the organization. Some researchers have suggested that credibility is a significant component of the PSI relationship (e.g. Perse, 1990) in that we like and trust media figures that we find to be believable or credible in the positions they take. The strong positive relationship between PSI and credibility we discovered in the current study adds further support to this discussion.

One result that we found interesting was that PSI was not stronger for Arab audience members that were living outside their country or region of origin – as might be expected if one supposed PSI to be a functional alternative to socialization or cultural maintenance (Sampedro, 1998). Instead, PSI was significantly higher for those living within their home country. This could lend support to an alternate perspective on PSI that suggests it is a gratification that needs to be fulfilled independent of interpersonal socialization needs (Tsao, 1996). Our findings do not necessarily contradict cultural maintenance studies, however. It could be that individuals who live within their home culture utilize the media to feel stronger links to the culture they live in, but perhaps miss most of in their day-to-day lives.

The relationships between various demographic and psychographic variables and PSI provide further justification of belief that audience members are more likely to parasocially interact with persona that they believe are similar to them. At the same time, these interactions can help researchers to develop a more clear understanding of the Al-Jazeera audience. Findings suggest the strongest link is in audience members who are 18–24 years old, Muslims, single people and those who consider themselves liberal. Generally speaking, education and income are inversely related to PSI with Al-Jazeera, suggesting that those with greater means had and utilized access to additional information outlets for both news and socialization.

Our study offers a valuable look at the Al-Jazeera audience while providing further support and clarification of the parasocial experience with news programming. Results of this study enrich the ongoing study of PSI, particularly with news programming. Although it is important to take into consideration the self-selective process of a web-based survey, the method offered us direct access to over 5000 respondents that read Arabic and have access to Al-Jazeera, something that could not have been done with any other method. Strong support was found for PSI as a component of news viewing and perception of news as credible. It was also discovered to be linked to both ritualistic and instrumental usage. Further in-depth analysis of Al-Jazeera programming as well as its various audiences is needed to continue to build upon the current research. Findings in this study can add additional insight to the limited but growing research into Arab media and their audiences.

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