

Parasocial Interaction in the Digital Age: An Examination of Relationship Building and the Effectiveness of YouTube Celebrities

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Since its inception in 2005, YouTube has allowed users to publish video content. Many have capitalized on the platform by amassing large followings and becoming bona fide YouTube celebrities. The beauty celebrity has become one of the most popular types of YouTuber, with some boasting over 7 million subscribers. Many brands have turned to YouTube celebrities to entice them to create user generated content that will serve as product endorsements aimed at a highly segmented audience. Viewers subscribe to watch the celebrities discuss a variety of beauty and lifestyle products or services. The interaction goes beyond simple product placement and branded entertainment, instead, viewers socialize with YouTube celebrities, whom may also serve as a product ambassador. In a sense,

YouTube celebrities become a friend sharing their opinion. The traditional word-of-mouth opinion sharing is now on a grander scale, and in a more intimate setting. This study explored the interaction between YouTube beauty celebrity and viewer, and celebrity influence. Participants reported feelings of knowing and familiarity with speakers, thus revealing the occurrence of parasocial interaction. YouTube celebrities were also viewed as credible sources who were trustworthy. Findings provide insight for organizations to channel YouTube celebrities as they attempt to build relationships with highly targeted publics.

Keywords: parasocial interaction; YouTube; social media; influencer marketing; social media celebrities

According to Forbes (Sorvino, 2017), beauty companies made an estimated \$445 billion in sales in 2017. The beauty industry encompasses much more than makeup; it contains segments for skin care, hair care, nail products, fragrance, and makeup. In 2010, skin care accounted for 27% of the beauty industry's overall sales, followed closely by personal care products with 23% (Romanowski). Hair care and makeup each accounted for 20% of sales, while fragrance accounted for 10% (Romanowski, 2010). A survey conducted by Cosmetics and Toiletries USA (Harms, 2011) found that the beauty industry suffered a 0.8% decrease in sales in 2009, yet experienced dramatic increases among skin care, nails, and makeup in 2010.

While many industries suffered due to the economic state in the U.S. in 2009, the survey results illustrate that consumers did not cutback on beauty products despite tough economic times.

Like the beauty industry, YouTube celebrities are also on the rise. Simply put, a YouTube celebrity is video blogger with a large following. The hit ABC television show, *Dancing with the Stars*, included Bethany Mota, an 18-year-old YouTube beauty guru with over 7 million subscribers. Mota was one of a few YouTube celebrities selected to interview President Barack Obama on different occasions. Many other YouTube celebrities have collaborated with major cosmetic companies like Tarte, CoverGirl, SmashBox, and Ulta to promote products. The channels of YouTube beauty celebrities have quickly become a unique vehicle for publicity, but perhaps most notable is the influence a top beauty celebrity may have on purchase intention. YouTube's most popular beauty celebrities post videos with topics ranging from: get ready with me, outfit of the day, monthly favorite products, night time beauty routines, and makeup tutorials. The most popular YouTube beauty celebrity, Michelle Phan, has over 7.4 million subscribers, and over 661.5 million video views. Another celebrity, Ingrid Nilsen, formerly Miss Glamorazzi, has over 4 million subscribers, and often has fellow YouTube celebrities on her channel to drive viewers to visit their channels. The friendships cultivated among some popular beauty celebrities contribute to the creation of a beautiful lifestyle filled with happiness, friends, celebrity, and beauty. The amount of views that produce audience comments, likes, and shares, create an interesting interaction between audience, spokesperson, and brands. The interaction goes beyond product placement and branded entertainment; instead, viewers socialize with YouTube celebrities whom may also serve as product ambassadors. In a sense, YouTube celebrities become friends sharing their opinion. The traditional word-of-mouth opinion sharing is now on a grander scale, and in a more intimate setting.

According to its website, YouTube has over 800 million unique visitors each month. Over 4 billion hours of video are watched each month, and 100 million people like, share, or comment on videos each week (www.youtube.com). YouTube's Partner Program allows video bloggers to grow an audience and earn money based on ad-share revenue. Many industries have also taken note. According to a New York Times article, brands may pay

YouTube celebrities upwards of six figures to create and post videos to their channels (Walker, 2012). YouTube claims the endorsements are well beyond the ad-share revenue obtained through the Partner Program. In a world filled with celebrity endorsers, the intimacy YouTube provides can be appealing to brands; this may be especially beneficial to the beauty industry. For example, L’Oreal paid traditional celebrities, Eva Longoria, \$2 million (Marcano, 2005), and Beyoncé, \$5 million (Garcia, 2016) to endorse at-home hair color and L’Oreal lipsticks. L’Oreal could alternatively pay or send samples to a YouTube beauty celebrity to try a product, review the packaging, and offer a testimonial about its benefits to an invested audience. The YouTube celebrity has the ability to offer credibility. Audiences are likely aware that celebrity spokespersons have a vested interest in the products they endorse. However, a YouTube celebrity is a regular person – a relatable character to an audience. Using a YouTube celebrity allows brands to target and engage with audiences in an innovative way (Correa, 2012). YouTube beauty celebrities post videos frequently, allowing subscribers to develop bonds and cultivate a sense of trust and familiarity. Instead of a flawless-faced celebrity endorsing a product, the trustworthy girl next door explains how a product works and why she loves it. The believability and closeness formed over time by YouTube celebrities creates unique public relations and advertising opportunities for the profitable beauty industry as it strives to develop powerful brand stories.

Several studies (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Guo, 2014; Martin, 2013) have examined social media marketing, but the integration of a new celebrity—the social media celebrity—is an area worthy of further exploration. The purpose of this study is to examine the presence of parasocial interaction and effectiveness of the social media celebrity phenomenon, specifically among YouTube beauty celebrities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In 1956, Horton and Wohl developed the concept of parasocial interaction (PSI), which is defined as the “pseudo-intimate relationship between the audience and media personalities” (Lim & Kim, 2011, p. 767). Though the concept has not been applied to YouTube, it stands to reason that parasocial interactions are likely developing among viewers and YouTube celebrities, thus providing a powerful and innovative avenue for public relations and advertising practice. In the case of YouTube beauty celebrities,

consumers can view all types of products in use by a familiar face—a friend. The friend is a YouTube celebrity who has the potential to be perceived as credible.

Himmelboim et al. (2014) explored the social mediators and mediated public relations on Twitter, and identified informal public relations mediators as, “social actors who are grassroots and are not associated with the organization or with the social institutions, such as news media” (p. 362). While social media celebrities are not listed as an example, they do fit the definition and likely serve as informal public relations mediators. A 2013 survey conducted by the Institute for Public Relations found that 87% of marketers believe the primary goal of social media are increasing brand awareness. Identifying social media celebrities as public relations mediators and the identified social media goal by marketers makes it essential to closely examine the role of social media celebrities.

Parasocial Interaction

Parasocial interaction refers to the relationships that develop between audiences and media figures (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Overtime, audiences develop intimate bonds that mirror real-life social interactions, which are intensified when viewers gain information regarding the personal lives of celebrities. According to Schmid and Klimmt (2011), parasocial interactions are the immediate psychological response at the moment of exposure. Multiple exposures can intensify and transform parasocial interactions into parasocial relationships. More frequent interactions and viewer perception of celebrity disclosure increases perception of intimacy (Perse & Rubin, 1989). Rubin and McHugh (1987) later drew from uses-and-gratification theory to further understand parasocial interactions between viewers and celebrities, and ultimately found physical and social attraction to be powerful factors in the development of a pseudo relationship. Similarly, Schmid and Klimitt (2011) examined attraction/admiration and homophily among different cultures and found social attraction to be the most determining factor of parasocial interactions. Celebrities are often associated with attractiveness, though in parasocial interactions, attractiveness includes physical appearance and personality, or perceived commonalities. Viewers may deem physical and personality traits as admirable and hope to acquire similar features.

Parasocial interaction has typically been described as one-sided and mediated. In contrast, several studies have claimed Internet communication technologies transformed parasocial interaction into a more accurate representation of social interaction (Ballantine & Martin, 2005; Kassing & Sanderson, 2009). The presence of parasocial interaction could be strengthened by the viewer's ability to post a comment or send an email to a persona, somewhat simulating a more realistic social interaction, regardless of whether the message is received. Thorson and Rodgers (2006) found that parasocial interactions were influenced by viewer perception of the interpersonal interaction via Internet-mediated relationships, while Savage and Spence (2014) found that social media had a negative impact on parasocial interaction when investigating their relationship with credibility among radio hosts.

In recent years, the value of parasocial interactions on social media as marketing strategy for promotion has been explored. Lueck (2012), for example, found the presence of parasocial interaction on the Facebook page of celebrity Kim Kardashian. In that case, the presence of parasocial interaction appeared as a vehicle for advertising. Colliander and Dahlen (2011) compared the effects of brand publicity in social and traditional digital media, specifically among blogs and online magazines. Blogs were found to create a higher purchase intention, and it was attributed to a high parasocial interaction between blog authors and readers. The findings posited that consumers need unbiased information from "people like me" (p. 319). Colliander and Dahlen (2011), and Lueck (2012) both noted the integration of personal information with brand content as a strategy. Revealing personal information could further simulate a traditional relationship between friends.

Despite research regarding parasocial interaction and parasocial relationship spanning decades, Schramm and Hartmann (2008) noted, "research on both phenomena still suffers from overlapping definitions and resulting measurements that do not distinguish between PSI and PSR" (p. 385). As a result, the researchers developed the PSI-Process Scales to provide a measurement tool focused solely on parasocial interaction. The scales are tailored to assess parasocial processes that occur during television viewing. The scales offered by Schramm and Hartmann differ from arguably the most applied scale, the Parasocial Interaction Scale (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). Schramm and Wirth (2010) later applied the PSI-Processing Scales to different media characters across theatre, a

soap opera, and a quiz show. Ultimately, the scales were valid across different media contexts. Auter and Palmgreen (2000) developed the Audience-Persona Interaction Scale to measure parasocial interaction. The API consists of four subscales concerned with identification, interest, group identification, and problem-solving ability.

Credibility

Perceived source credibility is vital to the success of any communication effort. Richmond and McCroskey (1975) argued that credibility is crucial in the identification of opinion leaders. Predictors of credibility, according to Ohanian (1990), include attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness. Attractiveness is based on physical appearance of the source, whereas expertise refers to the level of knowledge regarding the subject, and trustworthiness refers to confidence in a source. Amsbary et al. (1994) similarly determined that homophily, attraction, and credibility are related by examining participant responses to a person smoking. Schmid and Klimitt (2011) also referenced the importance of homophily, or the tendency to associate with those with similarities, in the development of parasocial interaction. McCroskey and Teven (1999) later defined the dimensions of credibility as expertise/competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill. The addition of goodwill refers to the degree to which the source cares about his or her audience. The study also posited credibility scales. More recently, Yilmaz and Johnson (2016) explored personalized and depersonalized language in messages posted on Facebook and Twitter, and its effect on online source credibility. The perception of source credibility differed by platform and language type. On Twitter, depersonalized language in tweets were deemed credible, while personalized language on Facebook posts were deemed credible. Yilmaz and Johnson further argued that the technological affordances of social media aid in determining source credibility, particularly among younger users.

The purpose of this study is to study the effectiveness and credibility of YouTube celebrity by examining parasocial interaction, and the influence on viewer buying intention to determine its worth as a unique vehicle for strategic communication efforts. To explore the presence of parasocial interaction, the following questions are posited:

RQ1: Does parasocial interaction occur between viewer and YouTube celebrity?

To explore viewer perceptions, specifically related to credibility and trust, the following research questions are posited:

RQ2: Are YouTube celebrities perceived as credible and is popularity level a factor?

The final research question will be qualitatively analyzed. The exploratory nature of the study allows for qualitative analysis to explore the potential for interaction to influence consumer purchase intention.

RQ3: Are viewers likely to purchase a product recommended by a YouTube beauty vlogger?

Research questions also attempted to uncover whether popularity level is a factor in the development of parasocial interaction, perceived credibility and trustworthiness, and the decision to purchase items based on source opinion.

METHODS

Undergraduate female students at a Midwestern university voluntarily participated in a between subjects 3x3 experiment. One group watched videos from YouTube beauty vloggers with 2 million or more subscribers, while another watched videos from beauty vloggers with 100,000-250,000 subscribers. Beauty vloggers with more than 2 million subscribers were selected for their established status and presence. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, researchers identified vloggers with arguably moderate subscribers to assess whether a clearly established presence is a factor.

The control group viewed cartoon clips of nonspeaking animals to remove the potential for parasocial interaction from occurring. It should be noted that viewing cartoon clips only removes the potential for parasocial interaction of occurring, though no participants indicated feelings of familiarity with the character in the clip. All videos ranged in length from five minutes to five and a half minutes. The six treatment videos had the same topic, and included product reviews. The speakers applied makeup for the day, discussed application, likes and dislikes, and stated whether they would repurchase or recommend the products.

Sample

Many top YouTube beauty vloggers are in their twenties and target a similar age group, thus college-aged women were an appropriate sample. Additionally, beauty videos on YouTube are the most widely consumed category on YouTube among US females in the 18-24 and 24-34 age ranges (www.youtube.com). It does not appear in the top categories viewed among U.S. males in any age group, thus males were excluded. Each treatment required 30 participants. The first treatment consisted of three groups and 90 participants; the second treatment consisted of three additional groups and 90 participants. The control group consisted of three groups and 90 participants. In total, there were 270 participants. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 27, though the majority (90.4%; n=244) were 19 to 22 years-old. The mean age was 20.37. The sample was ultimately representative of the target population. All identified as current college students, 91.5% (n=247) were undergraduate students and 8.5% (n=23) were graduate students.

To ensure participants had not previously viewed a video from one of the YouTube beauty vloggers used in the study, prior to completing the experiment, participants were shown a random list of twenty vlogger names and asked whether they had previously viewed their videos or were familiar with the vlogger. If participants selected yes, they were directed to a page offering thanks but indicating they could not participate. Doing so determined that viewers would indeed have their first interaction with the YouTube vlogger during the experiment.

Questionnaire

Participants answered a 28-item questionnaire after viewing the videos; 18 questions were adapted from Schramm and Hartmann's PSI-Process Scales (2008). The Schramm and Hartmann scales primarily include media personality as the subject; questions were adapted by changing the subject to YouTube beauty vlogger. The questions phrased the subject as "beauty vlogger" instead of "celebrity" to remove any potential positive associations with the term. Each of the 18 questions contained a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. To assess perception of credibility, participants were asked three questions regarding presentation of items and

trustworthiness of reviews. Participants were additionally asked how likely they were to purchase a product reviewed by the vlogger to assess immediate intent to purchase a product. The remaining items assessed descriptive information such as age, university classification, and average YouTube consumption.

FINDINGS

Among participants, 53% (n=143) reported watching 1-3 YouTube videos during an average week, while 20% (n=54) reported viewing 4-6 videos per week, 13.3% (n=36) reported viewing 10 or more videos, and 6.7% (n=18) reported viewing 7-9 videos per week. Only 7% (n=19) of the sample reported not viewing YouTube at all.

Nearly half of the participants (48.9%; n=132) reported viewing beauty/lifestyle YouTube videos most often, followed by 21.1% (n=57) most often viewing music videos, and 18.5% (n=50) most often viewing comedy videos. Very few respondents reported viewing videos in the following categories: education (4.4%; n=12), news and politics (1.5%; n=4), other/unidentified (1.5%; n=4), and sports (0.4%; n=1). Among the sample, the majority viewed videos aligned with YouTube's most popular categories: music, comedy, and beauty/lifestyle. Nearly 30% of participants reported previously purchasing a product reviewed by a YouTube beauty vlogger.

The first treatment set viewed videos from moderately popular vloggers or those with 100,000-250,000 subscribers. The second treatment set viewed videos from highly popular vloggers or those with 2 million or more subscribers. The control treatment set viewed a cartoon clip of similar length to the YouTube videos.

RQ1: Does parasocial interaction occur between viewer and YouTube celebrity?

Chi-square testing revealed a significant association between YouTube celebrity popularity and feelings of knowing the celebrity ($\chi^2=176.1$, $df=8$, $p<.01$). There was also a significant association between YouTube celebrity popularity and feeling as though the celebrity was the viewer's friend ($\chi^2=50.67$, $df=8$, $p<.00$). A significant association was also between popularity and enjoyment of the speaker's personality ($\chi^2=16.85$, $df=8$, $p<.03$).

RQ2: Are YouTube celebrities perceived as credible and is popularity level a factor?

The vast majority of participants in the high popularity treatments identified the speakers as knowledgeable (92%, n=83). Similarly, the majority (88%, n=80) of participants in the

moderately popular treatments identified the speaker as knowledgeable. Independent samples test showed no significant association between speaker popularity, moderately popular ($M=1.9$, $SD=.78$, $N=90$) and highly popular ($M=1.93$, $SD=.74$, $N=90$).

RQ3: Are viewers likely to purchase a product recommended by a YouTube beauty vlogger? There was a significant difference between purchase intent among viewers in moderately popular treatments ($M=2.8$ $SD=1.1$, $N=90$) and high popularity treatments ($M=2.4$, $SD=1.0$, $N=90$) conditions; $t(178)=1.9$, $p=.05$. In the moderately popular treatment, 53% ($n=48$) reported they would likely purchase a product reviewed by the speaker, while 68% ($n=62$) in the highly popular treatment reported they would likely purchase a product reviewed by the speaker.

DISCUSSION

Findings revealed the occurrence of parasocial interaction between viewer and YouTube celebrity. Respondents expressed feelings of knowing the speaker and feeling as though the speaker was their friend. Essentially, the speakers were relatable or likeable enough for viewers to enjoy. The initial findings appear to support a hypothesis that relationship building is occurring among viewers who watch YouTube celebrities. The vast majority of viewers perceived the YouTube celebrity as a credible source regardless of popularity level. However, more respondents (68%) reported they would likely purchase a product reviewed by the highly popular YouTube celebrity. Regardless, over half (53%) respondents reported they would likely purchase a product reviewed by the moderately popular celebrity, proving YouTube's viability as a vehicle for relationship building and as a means for public relations and advertising. It is important to note that moderately popular YouTube celebrities also receive public relations packages from companies and enter into partnerships with brands. While findings suggest even those with 100,00 to 250,000 subscribers are influential, using this group may be a research limitation. Future research should explore YouTubers who have even fewer subscribers. Doing so may provide insight as to whether the vehicle, YouTube, creates the illusion of credibility, or if it is the speaker themselves. Though popularity did not appear to be a factor in perceived source credibility, it should be noted that the moderately popular YouTube celebrities used in the experiment did appear to have professional lighting and sound. It is possible the

production quality also aided in perceived credibility among both popularity levels.

YouTube is essentially a proven tool for speakers to build powerful relationships, often based on trust, with viewers. Overall, the findings provide the following practical implications:

- Promoting business or products through parasocial interaction is viable and powerful
- Channel size is somewhat irrelevant; instead, locate channels with a community of users who are invested in the speaker
- Identify YouTube celebrities that closely align with brand voice and values to connect with targeted audiences

Many brands have turned to YouTube celebrities to entice them to create user-generated content to serve as product endorsements aimed at a highly segmented audience. Many also pay for product endorsements (Slutsky, 2010; Correa, 2012; Walker, 2012). YouTube allows users to create and broadcast content that often appears more realistic or organic than a television commercial. Most recently, some companies have produced YouTube videos starring YouTube celebrities. The move to control the content is representative of advertising opportunities with immense benefits. For example, the cost of producing a YouTube video is much less than a national television commercial, thus it may become a trend in the years ahead.

McCroskey and Teven's (1999) dimensions of credibility, specifically goodwill or the degree to which the source cares about their audience, is of particular interest in the case of YouTube celebrities. Many beauty celebrities ask for video ideas from audience members, which may show that they do care about user interests in an attempt to connect with the audience. However, the technique has multiple benefits. It builds the relationship, but also provides the necessary data to the beauty celebrity to strengthen his or her channel. In one sense, it is grassroots market research. YouTube celebrities also show gratitude and offer thanks to viewers who send caring messages when they deal with personal triumphs and trouble, though this is often done as a blanket statement in a video. Some also communicate messages about sharing goodwill to organizations and with each other within their online family. Simply responding to comments on YouTube or any other social media similarly create the allusion to audiences that celebrities care about

them. This type of interaction may certainly be a driving force in the parasocial relationship building that can occur between source and viewer, but it still one-sided as the viewer consumes more content from the speaker. The speaker does not have the same amount of knowledge about the viewer.

Many YouTube beauty celebrities are on other social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Snapchat. Ingrid Nilsen, for example, has over 1 million followers on Twitter, and over 750,000 on Facebook, weaving a web of interactivity that could quickly intensify parasocial interactions and the development of parasocial relationships. The care and concern for Nilsen's well-being was showcased in the comments section of a video she posted titled, "Something I want you to know (Coming Out)." In the video, an emotional Nilsen shares her sexuality with viewers for the first time. The video has been viewed nearly 15 million times, has over 755,000 likes, and over 150,000 comments. While some comments contain negative remarks, an overwhelming amount appear to offer messages of support and concern for Nilsen. In early 2016, Nilsen went on to interview President Barack Obama and starred on a Lifetime Network television show. As Ballantine and Martin noted, "Although parasocial relationships are based on simulated interaction, they can continue beyond the viewing period when viewers experience characters as close friends" (2005, p. 198). The additional social media activity helps further build the relationship between YouTuber and viewer.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the presence of parasocial interaction on YouTube to understand the relationship building process and the behaviors of people who use online communities. Social media are essentially the new way to spread word-of-mouth content, one many organizations have capitalized on. In this case, social media appear to influence purchase intention and brand building. It provides practical ideas to utilize parasocial interaction as a vehicle for brand building, public relations and advertising. The YouTube beauty community consists of thousands of channels, but as the findings indicate, the existence of parasocial interaction is present even among smaller channels. A speaker can have 100,000 subscribers, but those subscribers may be just as invested in the lives and content produced on the smaller channel than with the YouTube celebrity who has

millions of subscribers. Businesses may find benefit in investing in these smaller channels to tap into the tightknit community. In conclusion, the power of the YouTube celebrity as a means to connect an organization with a very targeted audience is clear. Parasocial interaction is no longer relegated to soap operas and athletes; instead, like many cultural shifts, it is ever present in the digital world.

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Online Connections

To follow Leslie Rasmussen: @Leslie_Ras