

Parasocial Interaction & Relationships Within the Digital Beauty Industry: Fact or Fiction?

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Abstract

Background scientific research: This paper examines new forms of communication and marketing as a means to forge closer relationships between beauty and cosmetic brands and consumers. As technological innovation has expanded access to information and marketing opportunities, the global beauty and cosmetic industry has become more competitive. Novelty-hungry younger consumers are disinterested in conventional marketing; instead, they seek a more intimate and social relationship with brands. This type of personal relationship is similar to a Parasocial Interaction (PSI) is a one-sided relationship between a media user and a media figure (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Horton & Strauss (1957) emphasise that the performer makes initiation in an exposure situation; for example, a brand using the performer to expose the audience to a product or service (Dibble et al., 2016). With continued exposure, interaction can develop into a Parasocial Relationship (Hartmann & Schramm, 2008), underpinned by three levels: cognitive, affective and behavioural - all of which are important in creating long-lasting relationships amid media user and persona. While Horton & Wohl (1956) and Horton & Strauss (1957) developed this theory in relation to mass-media from television personalities, digital transformation in marketing communications and social media platforms has magnified PSI and PSR's potential to increase brand relationships with consumers. This research illuminates consumer perceptions of PSI and PSR in the beauty industry context and, in particular, beauty vloggers.

Social media is integral to the facilitation of PSI and PSR; opinion leaders and digital celebrities now share their daily lives on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, arguably becoming omni-connected to their audiences (Chung & Cho, 2017; Kishiya, 2018). Since 2012, it has been recognised that PSI can be utilised on social media for marketing purposes; therefore, understanding how successful PSI can be

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triggered to encourage a PSR has become important for academics and marketing managers (Lueck, 2012; Rasmussen, 2018). YouTube is a popular platform associated with successful PSI and PSR, and the platform's characteristics provides an opportunity for beauty Vloggers to create content. Beauty Vlogger is the term used to explicate a content creator who posts beauty-related content (Hadriana et al., 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Beauty brands use vloggers as influencers and opinion leaders on YouTube, to promote their products, mostly to younger consumers (Hadriana, et al, 2019). Xiang et al. (2016) suggest that millennial consumers are most influenced through PSI and PSR on SM due to their need for technology and interconnectivity (Barton et al., 2014). Generation-Z are of special interest to marketing due to their growing spending powers and their ability to influence older generations (Bone et al. 2020).

Research issue to be addressed: In 2020, Statista (2021) valued the global Instagram influencer market at 2.3 billion USD. Brands are spending millions per year to employ attractive and influential media personae to endorse their products on social media platforms. Annual beauty-related content on YouTube reached 169 billion views in 2018 (Tankovska, 2021). An abundance of literature exists regarding PSI and PSR positively, acting as a problem-solver for distrust. However, less research is available involving consumer perceptions of opinion leaders and influencers that examines credibility and attractiveness among Scottish consumers, subsequently affecting influence on purchase decision. Therefore, this exploratory study examines the experience of PSI and PSR to as a useful tool to marketers who attempting to influence purchase decisions of 18- 25-year-old Scottish females.

Given the research issue to be addressed the following questions inform the study:

RQ1: To understand the influence of PSI/PSR upon the beauty purchase behaviour of 18-25-year-old Scottish females

RQ2: To determine whether stimulating PSI/PSR within the digital beauty industry is constructive for marketers when attempting to influence purchase behaviour of 18-25-year- old Scottish females

Methodology used: As the nature of this research is to examine subjective opinions, beliefs and experiences of young women when exposed to PSI or when experiencing PSR, the research is interpretive and data were gathered through in-depth interviews with 15 respondents (Guest et al., 2017). Convenience sampling was adopted to access which the key target audience for influencer-type advertising regarding beauty products (Hennigan, 2020): 18-25-year-old Scottish females. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) found that, compared with traditional celebrities, digital celebrities, such as those on Instagram or YouTube, impact purchase behaviours of female consumers aged 18–30 years, because this demographic considers influencers and opinion leaders to be socially closer to them (Hwang & Zhang, 2018). The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed to identify patterns and themes. Coding included identification of similar phrases or expressions which could be grouped under within themes.

Results achieved (conclusions) or expected as well as their relevance for theory and practice: Three themes emerged from analysis: Scepticism; Proficiency; Authenticity. Scepticism was a consequence of knowing that PSI was a commercial activity to increase sales, and emerged from the participants expressing constructs of trust, genuine and credibility which impacted upon PSRs. Proficiency related to 'knowledge' and 'expertise', where vloggers with professional experience in the beauty industry were considered to have more qualified and honest opinions. Authenticity included notions of inclusivity and reduced use of filters manipulating the imagery, along with a personable presence; this expanded to how PSI was experienced on different social media platforms and how the platform mechanisms encouraged building a PSR. From the findings, it seems that PSI and PSR have positive effects on purchase decisions and, however, scepticism of opinion leaders and influencers in relation to paid-promotions, sponsored content and incongruent influencer-brand-fit is a problem which undermines the proficiency and authenticity of online personae. The participants seemed more amenable to influencers and opinion leaders who demonstrated proficiency and in their content; moreover, the data reveals that expectation from this cohort is that the brands and influencers with whom they engage should be actively progressing discourse on inclusivity. This is not surprising as support for the Black Lives Movement and LGBTQIA+ has been identified in other contexts, but the expectation is for politically inclusive relationships in the beauty industry. The results are not only beneficial to digital beauty brands and influencers, but also for fashion brands and other efforts to influence consumer behaviour, such as influencing sustainable fashion practice. This research contributes to research in two ways. First, it extends understanding on existing literature on generational effects of social media interactions (e.g. Goodrich 2013); secondly, it explores PSI and the development of PSR as the basis of influencer partnership marketing within the context of one study.

Keywords: beauty vloggers; parasocial interaction; parasocial relationship

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