

# Fostering Consumer–Brand Relationships in Social Media Environments: The Role of Parasocial Interaction

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## Abstract

As brands solidify their place in social media environments, consumers' expectations have amplified, thus spurring the development of technologies to assist with the engagement process. Understanding the ways in which brands can preserve the one-to-one characteristics and intimate relationship qualities offered by social media while still meeting consumer expectations amidst the escalating volume of interactions has become essential. Drawing on the communications literature, this research proposes that parasocial interaction (PSI) theory may be used as a theoretical lens for designing successful social media strategies. Three studies, using a multi-method approach, provide evidence of PSI's role in the development of positive relationship outcomes. Mediation analysis reveals that this sense of feeling connected with the brand goes beyond the interaction itself and drives increased feelings of loyalty intentions and willingness to provide information to the brand. Evidence from this research suggests that these effects may not hold when consumers are aware of the possibility that the brand's social media response may be automated. These findings offer marketers theoretical guidance for fostering relationships in social media environments.

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“We now ask the question, ‘What will happen when a machine takes the part of A in this game?’ Will the interrogator decide wrongly as often when the game is played like this as he does when the game is played between a man and a woman? These questions replace our original, ‘Can machines think?’”

[– Alan M. Turing, *Computing Machinery and Intelligence* (1950)]

## Introduction

Social media have altered the ways people communicate, collaborate, and connect with others and marketers have recognized its great capability for connecting with customers (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010). Social media give marketers a means for direct interaction, which constitutes an ideal environment for

creating brand communities (Scarpi 2010), establishing and reinforcing relationships, and for gaining a better understanding of consumers through netnographic research (Kozinets 2002). Yet, social media demand that marketers understand the environment if they are to avoid failures (Deighton and Kornfeld 2009; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010; van Noort and Willemsen 2011), such as backlash which can reduce stock prices, damage reputations, create litigation costs, and even revenue loss (Butler 2011). Unlike static websites in the Web 1.0 era, the interactive nature of social media platforms developed in the Web 2.0 era has ultimately changed consumers' relationships with brands in these environments, even allowing them to become active players in the creation of brand stories (Gensler et al. 2013).

As social media usage increases, so do consumer expectations of brands, as evidenced by recent reports indicating that over one half of consumers now anticipate brand responses to consumer comments (Mickens 2012). As the number of consumers engaging with brands on these platforms steadily increases, firms are moving towards dedicated internal and external social media

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teams aided with software to assist automating the engagement process (Owyang 2012a, 2012b; Zebida 2012). While this hasn't quite reached the level of sophistication described in the opening quote, software that can be programmed to automatically and intelligently respond to consumer messages exists with the ability to integrate a number of custom variables to achieve a personalized interaction. As advances in machine learning are being applied to mine social media messages (Starbird, Muzny, and Palen 2012), it becomes realistic that it will become progressively difficult to distinguish machine from human response. As they decisively move towards automated engagement options (Owyang 2012a) it becomes essential to understand the ways in which marketers can preserve the intimate human relationship qualities offered by social media platforms while meeting consumer response expectations amidst the escalating volume of interactions.

In response, this paper pursues an empirical investigation of consumer–brand relationships on social media platforms by exploring the theoretical underpinnings that drive relationship development and the value they offer for companies. Drawing from the communications literature, parasocial interaction (PSI) theory is used to help explain a brand's success in developing strong ties with consumers through social media and provides insights on how to preserve intimate relationship feelings in light of the increasing movement towards response automation. Using this theoretical lens, two message components that transfer from traditional PSI environments to social media, perceived interactivity and openness in communication, are examined. Akin to a real-life relationship, this research proposes that PSI can result in positive relationship outcomes, specifically increased loyalty intentions and willingness to provide information.

To test these predictions, three studies are conducted using a multi-method approach. First, a survey with an online panel of adults explores consumers' active relationships with brands in social media environments. The results support the research premise that social media message cues (perceived interactivity and openness in communication) are two antecedents to the development of PSI. Moreover, feelings of PSI mediate the relationship between these message cues and the relationship outcome variables (loyalty and willingness to provide information). Ultimately, the sense of feeling connected to the brand through the interaction, not merely the interaction itself, drives these effects. Second, to further investigate this relationship and provide evidence of causality, the hypotheses are tested with an experimental design. The results from this experiment offer confirmation of the survey findings and provide causal evidence that message cues (perceived interactivity and openness in communication) can increase feelings of PSI, which in turn can increase loyalty and willingness to provide information. Lastly, Study 3 examines whether these effects might hold when participants become aware of the possibility that the brand's social media response may be automated. The results show that the effects observed in Studies 1 and 2 do not hold when the possibility for computer automation techniques have been made salient. Taken together, these findings offer marketers theoretical guidance for fostering relationships in social media environments.

## Theoretical Background: Parasocial Interaction Theory

The concept of parasocial interaction emerged from the communications literature and offers an explanation of the development of consumer relationships with mass media, such as radio and television (Horton and Wohl 1956). PSI is described as an illusionary experience, such that consumers interact with personas (i.e., mediated representations of presenters, celebrities, or characters) as if they are present and engaged in a reciprocal relationship. In essence, people believe they are engaged in a direct two-way conversation, feeling as though a mediated other is talking directly to him or her (Houlberg 1984; Levy 1979; Rubin, Perse, and Powell 1985). PSI relationships can develop to the point where consumers begin to view mediated others as “real friends” (Stern, Russell, and Russell 2007). Feelings of PSI are nurtured through carefully constructed mechanisms, such as verbal and nonverbal interaction cues, and can carry over to subsequent encounters.

While some research presumes PSI is developed through multiple interactions, others provide evidence that the length of the relationship is not directly related to PSI (Perse and Rubin 1989) and that feelings of PSI can arise during initial exposures. While continued interactions should lead to enduring relationships and might strengthen these feelings, PSI can be created from signals in isolated interactions (Hartmann and Goldhoorn 2011). Additionally, while traditional PSI research focused on a viewer's relationship with a persona in broadcast media, recent research indicates that it may extend beyond these domains. For example, PSI might be cultivated through the design and presentation of information, such that it does not depend on the presence of a literal mediated personality such as a newscaster or actor (Hoerner 1999).

### *Extension of Parasocial Interaction Theory to Online Environments*

In line with some recent applications of PSI to computer-mediated environments (Ballantine and Martin 2005; Hoerner 1999; Goldberg and Allen 2008), this research asserts that the development of PSI is not restricted to traditional mass media but can also be fostered through messages in an online environment that are designed to bring the viewer closer to a mediated persona, such as a brand or celebrity. While the Internet differs from traditional PSI environments (e.g., television and radio) in the fact that a direct two-way communication between an individual and the persona is technically possible, consumer-brand interactions on these sites oftentimes more closely mirror one-way conversations. For example, brand representatives typically base their responses in accordance with pre-approved scripts and response guidelines. Sometimes representatives are identifiable, but oftentimes this is not the case, leaving no clues to determine who is actually responding on behalf of the brand while supporting the perception that the message is coming directly from the brand (as opposed to employees on behalf of the brand). Moreover, in the case of multiple interactions with a brand, the brand responses are likely stemming from different employees yet appear to the

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