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“Friendship with a Brand”: Parasocial Interaction with Burger Brands on Social Media

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Media and Communication

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Brand and Media Strategy

by

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May 2018

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Keywords: Parasocial Interaction, Media Effects, Social Media, Brand Engagement

ABSTRACT

“Friendship with a Brand”: Parasocial Interaction with Burger Brands on Social Media

by

Alexander Carter

The present study represents a content analysis of the efforts of real-world brands to facilitate parasocial interaction with their followers. The researcher examined these social media exchanges through the scope of parasocial interaction theory, uncertainty reduction theory, and social response theory. The researcher examined posts in mid to late August 2017 and utilized a code sheet to find confirmed parasocial interaction triggers by brands, and examples of parasocial interaction in the posts of those brands' followers. The researcher looked to see if the utilization of previous research in controlled environments could provide the framework for studying the non-controlled conditions of a real social media page. He hypothesized that the brands he studied that properly utilized methods and triggers to facilitate parasocial interaction would in fact see higher rates of parasocial interaction. The data, while mostly not statistically significant does provide information that deserves further investigation.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my loving, brilliant, and supportive wife, Esther. Without your support and encouragement, I don't know where I would be in my life. You were the driving force behind my completion of this project, and I look forward too many more years of research and study by your side.

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DEFINITION OF TERMS

Term	Definition
Parasocial Interaction	A mediated interaction between a viewer and a persona that seems to be face to face despite moderation.
Parasocial Interaction Theory	The basis of most research into PSI, this theory states that people are likely to enter symbolic relationships with media personas based on that persona seeming to be similar to the viewer or their friend group.
Social Response Theory	According to this theory, computers are social actors themselves, and as such, the media viewed on a computer and the interactions through that media are interactions with real personas. Thus, normal social heuristics can apply to them.
Uncertainty Reduction Theory	This theory states that people will seek to reduce uncertainty as much as possible and will seek out information to do so. As the information is obtained, and uncertainty is reduced, relationships are expected to develop.
Casual Language	Language used by a brand that is not explicitly marketing driven and is in line with the normal social media culture of the time.
Social Media	Websites or applications that allow users to create content, interact with other users and brands, and participate in social networking.
Brand	A company or organization with its own distinct identity.
Parasocial Interaction Incident	A time during which a post contains a parasocial interaction as determined by the code sheet.
Sentiment	The positivity, negativity, or neutrality of a post or a collection of posts.

Advocacy	Expression admiration or loyalty to someone or something.
Mutual Awareness	The persona in the media knowing they are being watched and engaging in attempts to connect with the audience with actions such as looking at the camera or verbally addressing the viewer expand on the parasocial interaction.
Self-disclose	To share personal information with someone.
Uses and Gratifications	People will use a form of media in such a way as to fulfill their intended goals.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become a dominant platform for brand marketing. In 2017, brands in the United States alone spent over \$13.5 billion on social media marketing, a growth of almost \$2 billion from the previous year (Statista, 2018). A reason for this is the enormous presence of consumers on social media platforms. On Twitter alone at the end of 2017, there were over 330 million active monthly users (Statista, 2018). In this world of social media interaction, effectively engaging and influencing this large social audience is key, and few methods of engaging an audience are more effective than creating a parasocial experience with the audience (Chun et al., 2015).

In the past, researchers have conducted research on parasocial interaction on social media (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Kim & Song, 2016; Xiang, Zheng, Lee, & Zhao, 2016) and research on parasocial interaction with brands on social media in controlled environments (Chun et al., 2015; Labrecque, 2014). However, as of the time of this study, the researcher had not been able to find a study that looked at ways in which real brands were attempting to facilitate parasocial interaction with their followers on social media. That is the purpose behind this study. The researcher will look into a group of similar brands that were active on social media to see what methods, deemed effective by previous research, they were using to facilitate parasocial interaction. I will also be looking into the posts and replies of the brands' followers to see if parasocial interaction can be observed in public social media posts in a non-controlled environment, without the benefit of interviews or a survey.

The implications are of the utmost importance in the modern digital marketing environment. Not only is there a lot of money in social media marketing today, but that number is predicted to continue increasing over the next few years (Statista, 2018). Because of this increased spending, a healthy return on investment is needed for the brands. Brands that invest in facilitating parasocial interaction can see the possibility for positive results including increased loyalty, willingness to pay a premium for a product, and increased advocacy (Chun, Juran, & Sang Jin, 2015).

This study will stand as a foundation for future research on the subject of parasocial interactions in a real-world environment. Until now, the research reviewed so far has required surveys and/or interviews and the creation of fictional brands and their social media posts in a controlled environment (Chun et al., 2015; Labrecque, 2014). Confirming that real brands and real user replies can be studied will open the possibilities up to more researchers and should provide information that is more relevant to practicing marketing professionals. The other goal of the study is to test hypotheses developed based on decades of research into parasocial interaction, to see if the results are consistent when the proven methods are utilized by real-world brands.

Below is a statement of the goals and hypotheses of this study.

Table 1.

Goals

Goal 1: Examine posts by brands to analyze what techniques they utilize in order to elicit parasocial interaction.
Goal 2: Find parasocial interaction between real people and real brands in a non-controlled social media environment.
Goal 3: Build a foundation for future parasocial interaction research.

Table 2.

Hypotheses

H1	Brands that directly speak to their followers using a casual tone will illicit higher rates of parasocial interaction.
H2	The more posts a brand makes, the higher the rate of parasocial interaction
H3a	Showcasing user-generated content will results in higher rates of parasocial interaction
H3b	Showcasing user-generated content will result in higher rates of parasocial interaction.
H4a	Brands that reply often to their followers will have higher rates of parasocial interaction.
H4b	Brands that personalize their replies to followers will have higher rates of parasocial interaction.
H5a	Brands that craft posts with media, such as images and video, will have higher rates of parasocial interaction.
H5b	Brands that craft media posts with people in them will have higher rates of parasocial interaction.
H5c	Brands that craft social media posts with people's faces in them will have higher rates of parasocial interaction.
H6	Smaller, more localized brands will have a higher rate of PSI compared to larger, less localized businesses.

CHAPTER 2

FRAMEWORK

Parasocial Interaction

Parasocial Interaction Theory is a media effects theory that dates back to a study conducted in 1956 by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl. Richard Wohl started his academic career by looking at economic social science, before pivoting to studies of popular culture and urban sociology (Strauss, 1958). Donald Horton was an anthropologist interested in social science, specifically interested in the symbolic relationships people developed in which one party either did not actually exist, or was unaware of the other party. He worked in research at CBS, which led to his interest in people's relationships with television personalities (Peters & Simonson, 2004). Their similar interests led to them working together at the University of Chicago, and conducting the first official research into the phenomenon of parasocial interaction. They define parasocial interaction as a "Simulacrum of conversational give-and-take" and a "seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer" (1956, p. 215). The theory of parasocial interaction is a popular concept among media effects researchers (Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen, 2015), especially with the rise of new forms of mediated communication brought about by Web 2.0 (Chun et al., 2015; Labrecque, 2014; Tsiotsou, 2015; Xiang, et al. 2016).

In their groundbreaking study, Horton and Wohl found that the images on television contained nuances that provoked social cues in the show's viewers (Horton & Wohl, 1956). These social cues resulted in observations of viewers creating relationships with these "personas" (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p.216). These relationships were formed in

a similar manner to real life friendships, through observing characteristics both physical and verbal, as well as through conduct and attitude (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This persona that the viewer forms a relationship with took on a variety of roles including “friend, counsellor, comforter, and model” (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 3). However, the persona differs from “real” friends because they are a construct manufactured by producers and writers (Horton & Wohl, 1956). The viewers still perceived the relationship as an intimate social interaction in which both sides reciprocate. This perceived relationship is maintained even when the viewer acknowledges that it is an illusion.

In a parasocial relationship, the persona does not know nearly as much about the life of a viewer as the viewer does of the persona, this in turn creates a one-sided relationship (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In this relationship, keeping the relationship is almost exclusively upon the persona, they must continue acting in an acceptable manner to continue and strengthen the relationship (Horton & Wohl, 1956). For their stories to succeed, the studio needed to properly form attitudes with the viewer towards the different personas, if they want viewers to dislike a character, they give them negative traits, if they want them to like a character, they give them positive traits (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This is similar to how modern brands will attempt to attach personalities and traits to the personas in their commercials or on their social media pages (Ashley & Tuten, 2015).

Televisions writers and producers were able to find ways to create these relationships with their viewers (Horton & Wohl, 1956). One of the most effective methods used by the studios producing television shows was finding ways to blur the line between show and reality, with strategies such as intimate relationships with friends and

stylized traits that are consistent between programs being effective at eliciting parasocial responses (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Furthermore, the persona will blend reality and the show by bringing the show into the real world, with Horton and Wohl specifically mentioning the Steve Allen Show in which the host would show the street outside the studio and the people on it, making the outside world part of the show (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Over the past six decades, multiple researchers have contributed to a better understanding and evolution of parasocial interaction. Horton and Strauss' follow-up article in 1956, Rubin et al's PSI-Scale in 1985, and Hartmann and Goldhoorn revisiting Horton and Wohl's pioneering research in 2011 have helped evolve and frame the concept of parasocial interaction across multiple media platforms.

Following Horton and Wohl's development of parasocial-interaction theory, Horton and Anselm Strauss expanded upon the experience stating that para-social interaction is actually ignited and maintained by the persona, and the persona needs to acknowledge and address the audience to fulfill their role in the interaction (Horton & Strauss, 1957). This 1957 study aligns with later research by Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011) which found that mutual awareness is key to maintaining parasocial interaction.

Measuring parasocial interaction became a topic of research, but Rubin et al's PSI Scale, conceptualized in 1985, was the most popular scale for measuring parasocial interaction for years (Dibble et al., 2015). Rubin et al. (1985) evolved the definition of para-social interaction to be "interpersonal involvement of the media user with what he or she consumes." This involvement could include seeing the personalities as friends, imagining being part of their social world, and wanting to meet the performers. Most

importantly, they found a method through which feelings of parasocial interaction can be measured.

Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011), who revisited the original Horton and Wohl study, found other forms of parasocial interaction such as mind reading and mutual adjustment. Mind reading refers to human interactions resulting in the participants making assumptions of what the other is thinking or what they will say next, in the parasocial world, Hartmann and Goldhoorn extrapolate that TV viewers engage in mind reading when watching programs. In physical interactions mutual adjustment stems from participants matching the moves and expressions of their counterpart. In a para-social interaction, the viewer will respond and adjust to the persona on their television, and, while the persona may not directly adjust to the viewer's feelings, the viewer still may feel as if the persona is adjusting their actions. Hartmann and Goldhoorn put forth a new, broader definition of parasocial interaction as an illusory experience between a user and a persona.

The concept of parasocial interaction has a history of being muddied by comparisons to pure social interaction and an enduring parasocial relationship (Dibble et al., 2015). Horton and Wohl (1956) reported on the concept of a parasocial relationship, or a relationship that endures beyond a single viewing of media, but it was not directly conceptualized until later; and the difference between the two concepts is murky (Dibble et al., 2015). Dibble et al. set out to clarify the difference between a parasocial interaction and relationship by developing scales to measure both concepts (Dibble et al., 2015). The concept of parasocial interaction being a regular social interaction has also been put forth, but clear boundaries, such as physical proximity and non-mediation, have been drawn

providing a clear difference between parasocial and social interaction (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010).

Beyond Television

While the early days of parasocial interaction research focused on television and radio viewing, in modern research parasocial interaction has been observed in all forms of media, including sports, blogs, politics, game avatars, and social media (Tsiotsou, 2015). The proliferation of the internet as a means of communication and media consumption has led to a shifting of definition, from Horton and Wohl (1956) and Rubin et al.'s (1985) illusion of a face-to-face relationship definitions, to Tsiotsou's (2015) defining it as a non-passive relationship through heavy mediation.

A reason that parasocial interaction definitions have shifted from the focus on a one-sided affair to a focus on seemingly social interaction is the growth of online communities and multi-faceted online communication (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Kim & Song, 2016), but through a heavily mediated persona (Tsiotsou, 2015). The social media platforms of web 2.0, such as Facebook and Twitter, allow for communication between users which can foster near-social relationships with both parties being unknown to the other (Tsiotsou, 2015).

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Parasocial Interaction and Social Media

Throughout the history of parasocial interaction, the majority of early research had focused on television as a medium (Auter, 1992; Horton & Strauss, 1957; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Perse & Rubin, 1989; Rubin et al., 1985). In the early 2010s, along with the advent of Web 2.0, focus shifted towards examining parasocial interaction with media celebrities and athletes (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Kim & Song, 2016; Wohlfeil & Whelan, 2012). Eventually, researchers began looking at social media interactions and engagement with brands and the possibility of parasocial interaction being present between brands and followers on social media (Chun et al., 2015; Labrecque, 2014; Park & Kim, 2014; Tsiotsou, 2015). While there has been research on the measures and validation of parasocial interaction with brands and followers online, and the result of those interactions has also been researched, there has been little to no research that looks at existing social media efforts by real-life companies and their efficiency at triggering parasocial interaction with their followers.

The ability to enter into parasocial interactions online and especially through social media is well documented (Chun et al., 2015; Kim & Song, 2016; Labrecque, 2014; Tsiotsou, 2015). Social Response Theory supports the ability of users to enter into parasocial interactions through social media (Park & Kim, 2014). According to this theory, computers are social actors in and of themselves. Such people see interactions with media such as blogs and forums on computers as real personas, and normal social heuristics can actively apply to them (Nass, Steuer, & Tauber, 1994). Because computers

allow for media to be presented as a persona, and communication between the personas and users to take place, parasocial interaction can occur.

Social media provides a form of two-way mediated communication allowing brands to speak to and hear from their audiences (Labrecque, 2014). Today, consumers expect a brand to be receptive and to seek a relationship with them on social media (Kim & Song, 2016). In fact, over half of consumers expect brands on social media to respond to their comments within an hour (Lee, 2013), something that could not take place if not for the interconnectivity of web 2.0. The interaction without physically interacting that takes place online is similar to Horton and Wohl's (1956) initial research. Horton and Wohl found that one of the most intriguing things about para-social interaction was that intimacy was created between performers and the audience of strangers who may never have met in person, and despite the intimacy being fabricated and non-physical, it was influential with the audience.

This intimate and influential relationship has been heavily studied when looking at celebrities and athletes interacting with fans on social media (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Kim & Song, 2016). These celebrities and athletes were not playing a role in the traditional sense of being in a television show, but they put on a role with their fans on social media (Kim & Song, 2016). It is important to note that the interaction is parasocial, not social, because of the mediation the social media platform provides, both in physical mediation (Kim & Song, 2016), and in mediation through not knowing who is actually typing and responding to the messages (Labrecque, 2014). The persona put out by the celebrity figure on social media could be an act, the messages could be crafted by publicists or planned in advance to give the appearance of being "real."

Parasocial Interactions and Brands

Parasocial interaction between humans has been documented in studies such as Horton and Wohl (1956), Kim and Song (2016) and Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011), but not much study has been submitted on the subject of parasocial interaction between a human and a corporate brand (Labrecque, 2014).

As Horton and Wohl (1956) covered in their exploration of parasocial interaction, the persona is a construct created by the producers and writers, not a real person in the traditional sense. As such, it makes sense that a relationship can be formed between a brand as a persona on social media and the user (Labrecque, 2014; Park & Kim, 2014). Brands can have personality; they can interact with a singular voice, and they can address and communicate with their fans, just like a celebrity can (Labrecque, 2014; Park & Kim, 2014). In fact, because of the personalized nature of social media, people are more likely to interact with various media personas (Park & Kim, 2014), including corporate brands (Labrecque, 2014).

The interaction occurring between the brands on social media and their followers is parasocial more-so than social because of the heavy mediation that occurs through the very nature of a brand and its social media page. Social media management is usually a collaborative effort when it comes to corporate brands (Chun et al., 2015). This collaboration is similar to how a persona on television is created by writers and producers. Another aspect of brand social media that categorizes it as a mediated parasocial interaction instead of a direct social interaction is the anonymity of the brand managers. The posts and replies made by the brand can be made by different people; replies in a comment string could even be made by different brand managers (Chun et al.,

2015). There is also the growing trend of automation in social media management, even to the point of personalized messages being able to be created by computer programs (Labrecque, 2014). Because the follower of a brand page cannot know for certain who they are communicating with on a brand page, there is no way for a true social interaction to take place, but there can still be a parasocial connection with the brand persona (Labrecque, 2014).

The Impact

According to a Statista study, in 2016 86% of all Fortune 500 companies are on Twitter, and 84% are on Facebook (2016). Social media is a powerful tool in the arsenal of a brand, and by eliciting feelings of parasocial interaction, a brand can improve their standing with their followers leading to increased profit and advocacy (Park & Kim, 2014). Social media should not be used as merely a bulletin board for the brand to make announcements though (Kwok & Yu, 2013). Followers on social media crave engagement and will not develop relationships with brands that do not seek a relationship with them.

Not every person following a page on social media is a “fan” of the brand, nor does that mean they are in an engaged relationship with the brand; There are a variety of reasons for a person to follow a brand, not just brand appreciation (Park & Kim, 2014). Some examples include following for announcements and news, research purposes, drama, and brand humor. Furthermore, merely receiving a message is no sure sign of the development of an engaged relationship; this idea dates back to Horton and Wohl’s (1956) initial study of parasocial interaction.

Since Horton and Wohl’s (1956) initial study, it has been shown that parasocial interaction can change attitudes and behaviors, promoting actions such as purchasing

products associated with the persona (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In fact, parasocial interaction has been tied to having a large impact towards impulse buying behaviors (Xiang et al., 2016). Park and Kim found that not only did high-quality relationships with a brand influence purchasing behavior, they can result in consumers being willing to pay a premium for products. Furthermore, people engaged in a relationship with a brand are more likely to exhibit loyalty to the brand by advocating for it and talking about it positively on social media (Labrecque, 2014; Park & Kim, 2014). Park and Kim (2014) also found that high-quality brand relationships on social media translate to high-quality relationships with the brand offline. Research has also shown that parasocial relationships can result in positive attitudes and customer equity for the persona (Chun et al., 2015). Finally, brand followers engaged in a parasocial relationship become more willing to self-disclose to those brands (Labrecque, 2014).

CHAPTER 4

CAUSES OF PARASOCIAL INTERACTION

The Catalyst to Interaction

The first step, before parasocial interaction on social media between a brand and follower can occur, is that engagement must be made, there must be an initial interaction. According to Labrecque (2014, p. 135), “Feelings of PSI are nurtured through carefully constructed mechanisms such as verbal and nonverbal interaction cues and can carry over to subsequent encounters.” Horton and Wohl (1956) found that even predating the world wide web, para-social relationships needed interaction with the viewers, even though the interaction was heavily mediated. The personas on television needed to refer to and address the “viewers at home” so that they may keep their own independent identity allowing the relationship to exist. In a similar manner, brands need to address their audience on the platform in order to foster parasocial interaction (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011).

Horton and Wohl (1956) found that just receiving a message from the persona does not mean that they are engaged and interacting, this can apply to both television and social media. Just as someone may watch television in the background or watch out of boredom, the same thing may happen on social media, to develop a relationship with the brand, there must be a catalyst for that relationship to form. The catalysis is likely to occur when the brand sends out communication that users can relate to, whether emotionally or through history/lifestyle (Tsiotsou, 2015). Another way to facilitate engagement is when a company provides sales and discounts through their social channels. However, these discounts and sales need to be expressed in a conversational

tone. Speaking to consumers as marketing targets does not promote engagement (Kwok & Yu, 2013).

How to Facilitate Parasocial Interaction

To know how parasocial interaction can be facilitated on social media, it is important to first look at parasocial interaction triggers in general. When it comes to cultivating parasocial interaction on social media, every interaction matters (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). Perse and Rubin (1989) found that para-social interaction can occur in the very first exposure to a media message, and Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011) found that even isolated interactions can result in feelings of para-social interaction.

Relatability

Horton and Wohl (1956) and Horton and Strauss (1957) found that addressing the audience resulted in feelings of parasocial interaction. Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011) found that directly addressing the audience, face-front, is the best way to garner parasocial interaction, but that directly addressing the audience verbally works as well. Addressing the audience informally is another way to promote feelings of parasocial interaction, these informal interactions allow the viewer to forget that there is a mediation, and as such, they are more likely to feel connected to the personas (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Horton & Strauss, 1957). This is just as important online as casual and direct online speech is directly related to consumer engagement (Ashley & Tuten, 2015).

This casual and direct method of communicating with viewers/followers is known as relatability, and it, along with perceived similarity, is an important factor in developing feelings of parasocial interaction (Chun et al., 2015). Rubin, et al. (1985) found that a key root in parasocial interaction is the belief in the viewer that the media persona is like the

viewer and their friends. This applies to online communication as well, when brands on social media try to relate to and build relationships with their followers, the followers are more likely to pursue and maintain relationships with the brand (Park & Kim, 2014).

This sense of relatability and casual speaking is important online, Kwok and Yu (2013) found that social media users do not like to feel that they are being spoken to with no expectation of their replies and feelings being heard and addressed, however, this has not been the case with most brands, as they found that over 73% of brand messages in their study were marketing messages, not conversational. All of this online research falls in line with Horton and Wohl (1956), and Hartmann and Goldhoorn's (2011) findings that directly addressing an audience verbally elicits more intense parasocial interaction. Finally, research has shown that engaging in social causes your audience relates to can result in higher levels of parasocial interaction (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). While social responsibility is not a key in increasing customer satisfaction, it can boost trust and loyalty in current fans of the brand (Swimbergh & Wooldridge, 2014).

Because relatability and similarity are concepts that develop feelings of parasocial interaction and because casual wording and tone in posts increase feelings of relatability and similarity between social media users and brands, the following hypothesis is offered.

H1: Brands that directly speak to their followers using a casual tone will illicit higher rates of parasocial interaction.

Openness

The sense of openness or transparency and self-disclosure of the persona is important in fostering parasocial interaction (Auter, 1992; Labrecque, 2014; Perse & Rubin, 1989). Labrecque found that because parasocial interaction is seen as a friendship,

perceived openness is an important mitigating factor, and sharing information can build trust in the relationship. The concept of self-disclosure and openness is akin to “breaking the fourth wall” on television in which the performer directly addresses and shares information with the viewer which can lead to increased perception of a parasocial interaction between the viewer and performer (Auter, TV That Talks Back: An Experimental Validation of a Parasocial Interaction Scale, 1992).

A theory behind the importance of openness in a parasocial relationship is the Uncertainty Reduction Theory. This theory states that people want to reduce uncertainty as much as possible and will seek information to do so. As information is obtained and uncertainty is reduced, relationships are expected to develop, and behavior and feelings can be predicted (Perse & Rubin, 1989). This uncertainty reduction was important when Perse and Rubin investigated parasocial interaction with viewers of soap operas. Because viewers felt they knew the persona, they were able to accurately predict the persona’s feelings, actions, and attitudes, just as they can predict the feelings, actions, and attitudes of their real-life friends. Self-disclosure by the media persona is one way to reduce uncertainty (Perse & Rubin, 1989). When brands self-disclose on social media, their fans are more likely to feel that they know the brand as well as they know their own friends (Labrecque, 2014).

Because perceived openness leads to feelings of parasocial interaction and frequent updates and self-disclosure leads to feelings of perceived openness, a hypothesis is offered.

H2: The more posts a brand makes, the higher the rate of parasocial interaction.

Community

Part of self-disclosure on the part of a brand is an increase in participation by the viewer (Park & Kim, 2014), and it becomes more likely that the viewer feels as if they are part of a group (Tsiotsou, 2015). Frequent updates and sharing of information also can increase those psychological community bonds (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). When someone feels they have become part of a community with a persona, it can increase the perceived relationship with said persona, and communities revolving around that persona are seen as extensions of the persona itself (Park & Kim, 2014). This is also true in the case of brands (Tsiotsou, 2015). Furthermore, becoming more active within the persona's community can increase the quality of the perceived relationship a viewer has with that persona (Park & Kim, 2014; Xiang et al., 2016). Community is an important factor in parasocial interaction, the persona's community is seen as an extension of the persona itself, and in that community, social and parasocial interactions between community members results in increased feeling of parasocial interaction with the persona (Xiang et al., 2016).

A factor in the development of a powerful social community is asking for and sharing user-generated content (Chun et al., 2015). Research has shown that not only does asking for user-generated content elicit higher rates of consumer engagement (Ashley & Tuten, 2015), it also adds to the personality of the brand, and increases levels of trust which is central to promoting parasocial interaction (Chun et al., 2015). Sharing user-generated content, even without it being directly asked for, is likely to increase trust and consumer engagement (Kwok & Yu, 2013). The phenomenon of openness and user-generated content sharing leading to parasocial interaction, is in line with Horton and

Strauss' (1957) findings where shows with audience participation were shown to deepen the feeling of engagement with viewers.

Because community building is important to the social media parasocial interaction building process and because asking for user generated content is a powerful method to evoke feelings of community involvement, thus, two hypotheses are posed.

H3a: Asking fans to create user-generated content will result in higher rates of parasocial interaction.

H3b: Showcasing user-generated content will result in higher rates of parasocial interaction.

Expertise and Credibility

When developing a parasocial relationship with a persona, media viewers are attracted to feelings of expertise and credibility within the persona (Xiang et al., 2016). Expertise can range from the ability to solve problems (Auer & Palmgreen, 1997), to being a credible source of industry-related information (Chun et al., 2015). Xiang et al. (2016) found that perceiving usefulness out of a social commerce platform positively affects users' enjoyment, utility is important in developing a parasocial relationship. Park and Kim (2014) found a "uses and gratifications" approach to explaining the roles of expertise and credibility in developing parasocial interactions. They found that consumers are likely to enter into relationships with brands when they see the brand and its social platform as providing benefit to them.

Furthermore, in line with credibility and trust, Labrecque (2014) found that when a user perceives a social media message as being computer-generated, that perception will decrease feelings of parasocial interaction, even if that message is personalized.

Timely, relevant, and personalized communication are important for developing trust and cooperation in a relationship (Labrecque, 2014). As mentioned earlier, social media users expect responses from brands, and they expect them quickly (Lee, 2013). Signaling that the brand is listening and adding a “human” element to the mediated interaction can increase feelings of openness and credibility (Labrecque, 2014).

Because credibility, trust and the “human” element are important in developing parasocial interaction with brands on social media and because consumers expect brands to reply, therefore, two hypotheses are posed.

H4a: Brands that reply often to their followers will have higher rates of parasocial interaction.

H4b Brands that personalize their replies to followers will have higher rates of parasocial interaction.

Attraction and proximity

Horton and Wohl (1956) found in their initial study, that attraction to the persona was a major factor in the development of parasocial interaction. This finding was further tested, confirmed, and refined by Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011). They found that having a human directly address the audience when speaking to them increases feelings of parasocial interaction more-so than if the persona was facing a different direction (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). Furthermore, Kwok and Yu (2013) found that social media users are more likely to pay attention to posts that contain images over statements (2013). These images could benefit the brand by giving it a sense of personality and attractiveness.

Because, positive characteristics such as attraction, personality and similarity are key to developing parasocial interaction, because seeing a human face when being addressed also increases perceptions of parasocial interaction (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011), and because social media users are more likely to notice images on their feed (Kwok & Yu, 2013), it stands to reason that brands that post images, especially if those images contain humans preferably humans facing the audience, should see higher levels of parasocial interaction. Thus, three hypotheses are posed.

H5a: Brands that craft posts with media, such as images and video, will have higher rates of parasocial interaction.

H5b: Brands that craft media posts with people in them will have higher rates of parasocial interaction.

H5c: Brands that craft social media posts with people's faces in them will have higher rates of parasocial interaction

Proximity and Familiarity

Proximity and familiarity is also another factor in developing parasocial interaction (Chun et al., 2015). Proximity refers to physical or conceptual closeness, and it can influence perceptions of the media persona (Chun et al., 2015). Because social media allows for a 24-hour cycle of interaction (Labrecque, 2014), the potential for feeling conceptually close to a brand, without being anywhere near it is powerful. Furthermore, Schramm and Hartmann found that perceived presence can cause increased intensity of parasocial interaction (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). Furthermore, the presence of Uncertainty Reduction Theory in the parasocial interaction development

means that consumers are more likely to engage in parasocial interaction with businesses that they are more familiar with (Perse & Rubin, 1989). The possibility of local owners-operators, involvement in the community, and hiring of locals could result in less uncertainty around the brand, which would then result in more trust and higher levels of parasocial interaction (Perse & Rubin, 1989). Since smaller, more localized businesses could see their customers have an increased sense of presence, proximity, and familiarity, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H6: Smaller, more localized brands will have a higher rate of PSI compared to larger, less localized businesses.

CHAPTER 5

METHODS

Research Design

To address the hypotheses, the researcher relied on a content analysis of brand social media efforts on Twitter and a content analysis of consumer posts both in response to the brand social media messages and directly to the brands publicly. The method of content analysis of brand social media messages has been effective in the past at finding successful engagement strategies for brands and therefore translates well to this study (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Because Twitter is unique in its communication, allowing a limited number of characters, the researcher decided not to include other forms of social media to ensure that what was found was consistent. Brand strategy may vary on social platforms, with more copy allowed, and consistency was key for the research. To accurately measure how often parasocial interaction-related communication is present within the brands' social media fanbase, a content analysis is needed to identify posts in which a parasocial interaction is present, and a quantitative analysis is needed to measure and find comparisons.

A list of parasocial interaction triggers was gathered from previous studies (Auter, 1992; Labrecque, 2014; Chun et al., 2015; Schramm & Hartmann, 2008; Tsiotsou, 2015; Dibble et al., 2015), to identify methods brands might use to elicit parasocial interaction within their fanbase. To see the effectiveness of the brands' triggers, a code sheet of parasocial interaction examples, pulled from a variety of previous studies (Auter, 1992; Chun et al., 2015; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Labrecque, 2014; Perse & Rubin, 1989; Tsiotsou, 2015) was used to find parasocial interaction examples. To confirm that what

was found was indeed parasocial interaction, coding was utilized to find examples of advocacy, which is a shown result of parasocial interaction (Park & Kim, 2014). Furthermore, the coders graded each fan post as either “positive,” “neutral,” or “negative” to gather sentiment in order to verify the parasocial interaction results, since positive sentiment is a result of parasocial interaction (Chun et al., 2015).

Sample

Because the objective of the study is to look for contributing factors to consumer parasocial interaction, the right brands are needed. For this study the researcher needed to look at a collection of similar businesses to eliminate possible product biases. The businesses selected were fast-casual burger restaurants: Burger Fi, Shake Shack, and Smashburger. These were selected these businesses because they had a presence on Twitter. They were all focused on burgers, had similar dining experiences, and had locations in a variety of regions. Furthermore, each business is different in size compared to the others with Burger Fi having 93 locations, Shake Shack having 162 and Smashburger having 332 as of the beginning of the study (February 2018). This variation in location numbers was a factor for Hypothesis 6 to look at locality and familiarity as a possible variable for developing parasocial interaction.

The sample for the content analysis was gathered from the Twitter users who interacted with the brands on social media. The two main groups were fans that directly replied to posts made by the brands and fans that publicly reached out to the brands by tagging them or mentioning them by name and having the brand reply to them. The researcher did not look at posts in which the brand was not tagged either directly or through replying to the brand (Twitter will automatically tag whomever a user is directly

replying to). This was decided for two reasons. First, because this research is looking for interaction, the researcher only sought out attempts to interact with the brand. By not tagging the brand, it cannot be confirmed that they were seeking to interact. Second, because the researcher was searching through Twitter's advanced search, the focus of the posts was narrowed to posts in which the brand was tagged to keep everything consistent. Misspellings of the brand names could occur such as: breaking the name into too many words, combining multiple words into one, and general misspellings. Thus, to keep the searches consistent only posts in which the brand was properly tagged were chosen. Furthermore, the researcher did not include posts from accounts that were obviously media-related or business-related. This was decided since the focus of this study was on consumers, not other businesses. It was determined whether a commenter was a media entity by looking at the name and user handle. If it could be determined that they were a business or media outlet, then they were not added to the database. For the privacy of the users, the researcher did not click on user profiles, instead relying on publicly available information to determine if they were a business or media outlet.

For brand posts, only posts in which the brand directly posted were counted. Retweets were not included unless the brand quoted the tweet and provided separate copy. This was done because the post on Twitter would not show up as being made by the brand, instead it would show as being made by another user. To keep everything consistent, the researcher decided to only utilize posts that were branded, and directly linked to the brand itself.

Posts were pulled from August 10-24, 2017 for this study. This time frame was selected since the posts were long enough ago to lessen the potential for more comments

being made during the data collection while being recent enough to reflect the current branding for the companies. Furthermore, this time period avoided major American holidays, with only the solar eclipse of August 21 being a major event. It was a goal to avoid holidays in order to have normalized data that can be applied during any time frame.

Data Collection

Screenshots of the sample posts were taken from February 7, 2018 through February 10, 2018. In total, 362 valid fan posts and 63 valid brand posts were collected. Validation of fan posts merely meant that the post was made during the time period, the brand was tagged at some point, and the post did not appear to be made by a company or media entity. Validation of brand posts involved ensuring the post was made during the correct time period, the post was made by the brand and wasn't a retweet, and that the post was public on the page's timeline, not an advertisement. The screenshots for both categories of brand posts and fan posts were then randomly split into two data sets for each category. This was done via placing the file names into Excel spreadsheets, with random numbers generated within the column next to the titles. The images were sorted by the random number and then split into two equal groups, then overlapped 10% of the files for intercoder reliability tests. Each coder was given access to a Google Drive Folder with their respective images, and shared folders of the intercoder images.

The first coder was the researcher behind this study whose vita is outlined at the end of this paper. The other coder was Kylie Douglas, Kylie was an Honor's student at East Tennessee State University majoring in Mass Communication with a concentration in advertising/public relations. She had over two years of private sector experience

working with social media, and had worked with foodservice brands in the past, including a local burger company.

Code Sheet Development and ICR

For the fan posts, the initial code sheet was created, and the researcher and coder met to train on the sheet before attempting the first batch of crossover posts (50% of the intercoder crossover posts), further refinements were made to the code sheet based on these first tests, and the next half of the batch was completed.

For the brand posts, the initial code sheets were created, and the coders met to train on the sheet before attempting the crossover posts (about 25% of the total posts).

A Cohen’s Kappa test was performed to ensure inter-coder reliability was sufficient. The results are in the table below:

Table 3. Inter-Coder Reliability and Cohen’s Kappa

Category	N of Valid Cases	Cohen’s Kappa
Total Parasocial Interaction	44	.844
Brand Reply	44	1.000
Personalized Reply	44	.891
Casual Language	18	.753
Image Present	18	1.000
Person in Image	18	1.000
Face in Image	18	1.000
Ask for Content	18	N/A*
Share User Content	18	1.000

* Cohen's Kappa calculation was not possible because there were no posts looked at in which the brand asked for content. Because of this, there was only a constant "no" in reporting.

Because the content analysis occasionally relied on social cues and popular culture references, the researcher and coder did ask occasional questions about the meaning of certain sayings or words in context. Examples include: the definition of GOAT (Greatest of all Time), what a reply of "Bet." means, and occasional discussions of the meaning of an emoji. When discussing the meaning of these cues, the researchers did not discuss the code sheet, instead translating social context of the posts for ease of coding.

Brand Parasocial Interaction Code Sheet development began by identifying what triggers would need to be looked for to supply the data to study the hypotheses. Data for all hypotheses except for H4a and H4b were all placed onto the brand parasocial interaction trigger sheet. Data for H4a and H4b, examining replies and reply personalization's effect on parasocial interaction, were collected via the user parasocial interaction response sheet because it could be gathered while collecting data from individual user posts. After two training sessions, pertinent information to help with coding were added. And after intercoder reliability tests, a few more bullet points were added.

Development for the User Parasocial Interaction Response Sheet began by examining past studies that measured parasocial interaction. Because this study took place in a non-controlled social environment, and because users could not be surveyed or interviewed, some of the identifiers had to be transformed for content analysis usage. Three training sessions took place concerning the code sheet, and additional information was provided. After the second training session, the post category section was added to

assist in sentiment analysis. After the first batch of intercoder reliability tests, more additions were made to the code sheet, and a second batch of tests were conducted after which no further changes were made.

On the code sheets, checkboxes were supplied. However, because coding was completed electronically, researchers instead bolded a line item instead of checking the box. For Y/N coding, the yes or no option was bolded. Each section allows for multiple boxes to be checked except for the post category and sentiment analysis in which one box must be checked. The post category section is the only section of the code sheet that was not utilized in the final data analysis because it was created only to assist in sentiment analysis.

Analysis

After completion of the coding, the results were placed into an excel spreadsheet. Each section of the code sheet was quantified with yes = 1 and no = 0 for each section except for the sentiment section where positive was assigned a 1, neutral assigned a 0, and negative assigned a -1. The total number parasocial interaction incidents in each post was calculated and placed into the data set.

For hypotheses 1-3b and 5a-5c, a linear regression was performed comparing each variable associated with its respective hypothesis to the total parasocial interaction incidents. It was decided to perform a linear regression in order to determine the effect each variable had on total parasocial interaction incidents, and whether that effect was statistically significant.

For hypotheses 4a and 4b, a *t*-test was conducted comparing the variables associated with each hypothesis and the parasocial interaction incidents in each fan post.

The *t*-test was conducted in order to determine the effect each variable had on parasocial interaction incidents, and whether the effect was significant.

For hypothesis 6, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted comparing the brand size to the total parasocial interaction incidents. A Bonferroni post-hoc was conducted as well comparing each respective brand size and its total parasocial interaction incidents to one-another. The one-way ANOVA was conducted in order to determine the effect that brand size had on parasocial interaction incidents, as well as whether that effect was statistically significant. The Bonferroni post-hoc was conducted to determine the effects of the variables as well as to correct for performing too many tests that may result in statistical significance when there is none.

Finally, a Pearson correlation test was conducted to find the correlation between sentiment score and total parasocial interaction. This was conducted to find the correlation between the two and to assert that the correlation was significant.

CHAPTER 6

RESULTS

In total, the coders looked at 362 total fan-made post and comment strings (individual strings could include more than 1 post/reply), of those BurgerFi had 27, Shake Shack had 200, and Smashburger had 135. The coders also looked at 63 total brand posts (not including replies the brands made to fan-made posts).

Table 4. *Total PSI Incidents*

Brand	Total PSI Incidents
BurgerFi	18
Shake Shack	126
Smashburger	73

In order to verify that the parasocial interaction that was found was indeed parasocial interaction, data on advocacy (Park & Kim, 2014) and sentiment (Chun et al., 2015) was found, as these are shown to be effects of parasocial interaction.

Table 5. *Advocacy and Sentiment*

Brand	Advocacy	Sentiment
BurgerFi	6	3.4
Shake Shack	55	3.3
Smashburger	28	0.93

The researcher conducted a bivariate correlation test in order to ensure that sentiment and parasocial interaction were correlated with 2-tailed significance.

Table 6. *Sentiment Correlation*

	Pearson Correlation	2-tailed significance
Sentiment & Total PSI	.518	.000

The methods behind the collection of the sentiment scores was outlined in the methodology section, the sentiment scores were then found after collection by dividing the number of positive sentiment posts by the number of negative sentiment posts. Thus, a sentiment score of 1.0 would mean an equal number of positive and negative sentiment posts by fans, with anything under 1.0 being mostly negative, 2.0 indicating two times as many positive posts, 3.0 indicating three times as many positive posts, etc.

For hypotheses 1-3b and 5a-5c a series of linear regression analyses was conducted to compare the hypotheses variables against the total parasocial interaction.

Table 7. *Linear Regression Results*

Hypothesis	R²	Degrees of freedom	F Value	p Value
1	.000	360	.007	.932
2	.001	360	.328	.567
3a	.000	360	.155	.694
3b	.000	360	.033	.855
5a	.001	360	.231	.631
5b	.002	360	.698	.404
5c	.003	360	.909	.341

H1 considered whether casual posts influenced the total parasocial interaction rate. The regression model found that the variable did not have a strong effect ($R^2 = .000$) and the results were not statistically significant ($F = .007, p = .932$).

H2 considered whether the total number of posts made influenced the total parasocial interaction rate. The regression model found that the variable did not have a strong effect ($R^2 = .001$) and the results were not statistically significant ($F = .328, p = .567$).

H3a considered whether asking for user generated content influenced the total parasocial interaction rate. The regression model found that the variable did not have a strong effect ($R^2 = .000$) and the results were not statistically significant ($F = .155, p = .694$).

H3b considered whether posting user generated content influenced the total parasocial interaction rate. The regression model found that the variable did not have a strong effect ($R^2 = .000$) and the results were not statistically significant ($F = .033, p = .855$).

H5a considered whether posting images influenced the total parasocial interaction rate. The regression model found that the variable did not have a strong effect ($R^2 = .001$) and the results were not statistically significant ($F = .231, p = .631$).

H5b considered whether posting images with people in them influenced the total parasocial interaction rate. The regression model found that the variable did not have a strong effect ($R^2 = .002$) and the results were not statistically significant ($F = .698, p = .404$).

H5c considered whether posting images with people’s faces in them influenced the total parasocial interaction rate. The regression model found that the variable did not have a strong effect ($R^2 = .003$) and the results were not statistically significant ($F = .909$, $p = .301$).

H4a considered whether a brand replying to a user influenced the total parasocial interaction rate. A *t* test was conducted between the 152 posts that had no brand reply ($M = .43$, $S.D. = .769$) and the 210 posts that had a brand reply ($M = .72$, $S.D. = 1.003$). The test revealed a significant difference between the conditions ($t(360) = -3.056$, $p < .002$).

Table 8. *H4a t-Test Results*

Hypothesis	S/N	df	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>S.D.</i>
H4a	Supported	360	-3.056	.002	.43 (No reply) & .72 (Reply)	.769 (No reply) & 1.003 (Reply)

H4b considered whether a brand that personalized a reply to a user influenced the total parasocial interaction rate. A *t* test was conducted between the 194 posts that had no personalized reply ($M = .37$) and the 168 posts that had a personalized reply ($M = .86$). The test revealed a significant difference between the conditions ($t(360) = -5.118$, $p < .001$).

Table 9. *H4b t-Test Results*

Hypothesis	S/N	df	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>S.D.</i>
H4b	Supported	360	-5.118	.000	.37 (No	.732 (No

					reply) & .86 (Reply	reply) & 1.044 (Reply)
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H6 considered whether the size of the brand influenced the total parasocial interaction rate. A one-way ANOVA was conducted comparing the size of the brands to their total parasocial interaction rate.

Table 10. H6 One Way ANOVA Results

Hypothesis	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	F	p-value
H6	.774	2	.454	.636

Furthermore, the researcher performed a Bonferroni post hoc test comparing the multiple sized brands to each other.

Table 11. H6 Bonferroni Post-Hoc Results

(I)Brand	(J) Brand	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	Lower bound (95%)	Upper bound (95%)
Shake Shack	BurgerFi	-.037	.189	1.000	-.49	.42
	SmashBurger	.089	.103	1.000	-.16	.34
BurgerFi	Shake Shack	.037	.189	1.000	-.42	.49
	Smashburger	.126	.195	1.000	-.34	.59
SmashBurger	Shake Shack	-.089	.103	1.000	-.34	.16

	BurgerFi	-.126	.195	1.000	-.59	.34
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The results of the one-way ANOVA show that the data was not statistically significant (p-value = .636). The results of the Bonferroni test were not statistically significant either (sig = 1.000).

CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION

This study sought to create a foundation for future research into parasocial interaction in actual practice. The researcher sought to find out if parasocial interaction could be found in non-controlled social environments, and whether non-controlled posts by real brands could elicit parasocial interaction. The findings of this study do support that parasocial interaction can be found in non-controlled social environments, with some statistically significant data to support that non-controlled posts by real brands could elicit that parasocial interaction.

With the code sheet, the coders were able to find parasocial interaction within the posts and comments made by Twitter users towards the brands in question. This information was verified by comparing the advocacy and sentiment of the brands. The advocacy rankings fell in line with the total parasocial interaction incidents. The sentiment score, being an average of the overall sentiment falls in line with the percentage of overall fan posts that had a parasocial interaction incident.

Table 12. *Brand PSI incident percent and sentiment average*

Brand	Percent of posts with PSI	Total PSI Incidents	Sentiment Score
BurgerFi	37%	18	3.4
Shake Shack	32%	126	3.3
SmashBurger	23%	73	0.93

Both Shake Shack and BurgerFi had a marked difference in the percent of total fan posts that had parasocial interaction incidents over Smashburger. They also lead in the categories of percent of posts, with users speaking to the brand like a friend and self-disclosure respectively. They also had similar sentiment scores that were much higher than SmashBurger's.

The sentiment scores, and their correlation with the total parasocial interaction numbers, support that the researcher found parasocial interaction. This verification means that it is possible to find and identify parasocial interaction on public social media posts in a non-controlled environment.

Concerning *HI*, "Brands that directly speak to their followers using a casual tone will illicit higher rates of parasocial interaction," while statistical significance was not found, the data still showed a somewhat negative trend. Shake Shack, which had the most parasocial interaction incidents, had the lowest use of casual language in their posts. They had a marketing-oriented approach, utilizing casual language much less often than the other two brands. One explanation for this could be the trust factor in parasocial interaction. Trust is an important factor in building parasocial interaction (Chun et al., 2015), and one reason level of casual language posts had a negative impact on parasocial interaction rates could be that the brand is coming off as "fake" to the followers. Another reason behind this is that authority and expertise of a brand can increase parasocial interaction (Xiang et al., 2016). Shake Shack, by not using casual language, could have better positioned themselves as an authority and expert, leading to their parasocial interaction rate.

For *H2*, while the number of posts made by the brand did not statistically significantly affect the levels of total parasocial interaction, there is still a data trend that supports the hypothesis. While BurgerFi had the most total posts and the least number of total parasocial interaction incidents, a reason for this could be that BurgerFi was the smallest brand and had the least amount of fan posts in total. They did lead in terms of percentage of posts that contained a parasocial interaction incident and in fact the rankings for the percentage of posts with parasocial interaction incidents, and the ranking for the number of posts a brand made are identical. When looking at how often a brand replied to a comment from a fan, BurgerFi was actually the least likely to reply, and because *H4a* showed that replying to comments heavily influences the total number of parasocial interaction incidents, this could represent a difference in priorities for the brands.

For *H3a* and *H3b* when it comes to user content request and sharing, there wasn't much data. Only BurgerFi explicitly asked for user-generated content, and they only asked once. So, while the data is not statistically significant, there was also very little data to draw from in general. As far as sharing user-generated content goes, BurgerFi lead the way by a large margin. The majority of posts they made were of user-generated content. Shake Shack did not share any user-content during this time period though, but still performed the best in parasocial interaction metrics. Smashburger shared a few different user-generated posts but did not perform as well in total incidents as Shake Shack, and had a lower percentage of posts with parasocial interaction indicators present.

In regards to *H4a* and *H4b*, replying to users and personalizing replies was a tactic that had a large amount of supporting research to back it up as a contributor to

parasocial interaction. Those two variables were heavy influencers of total parasocial interaction, and were extremely statistically significant. Because these hypotheses directly relate to brands interacting with their followers, and they were supported by the study, there is further validation that what the researcher found in his research was true parasocial interaction.

For *H5a*, *H5b*, and *H5c*, when it came to studying the effect of images on parasocial interaction rate, the data was extremely similar. Every single post by the brands except for one by Shake Shack, who had the most parasocial interaction incidents, was an image post or gif. As such, almost nothing could be gathered from that data. When it came to images including people and people's faces, BurgerFi had the most images with people and their faces, but they also had more posts in general, and most of them were shares of user content, not posts by the brand. A large portion (64%) of Shake Shack's posts contained people, with neither of the other brands cracking 50%, furthermore, 21% of Shake Shack's posts contained images of people's faces.

In regards to *H6*, One of the main questions behind this study was seeing whether locality/familiarity was a factor in parasocial interaction rate. After finding support this question evolved into a hypothesis and was the main source behind choosing the array of brands in the study. While there was not support in the linear regression model, there is some support when looking at the percentage of fan posts that contain parasocial interaction. BurgerFi, the smallest brand, had the highest percentage of fan posts containing parasocial interaction, followed by Shake Shack, the second smallest, and then SmashBurger, the largest.

Limitations

There were a few challenges to this study. To begin, parasocial interaction in this study was considered a pass/fail. Because of this, the researcher did not measure how powerful each person's parasocial interaction was. This inclusion of impact could affect the outcome of each brand's parasocial interaction rate. For instance, had the study weighted outright parasocial interaction of talking to the brand like a friend as heavier, Shake Shack would have been number one, as they lead the way by a large amount. If outcomes such as self-disclosure had been weighted higher, BurgerFi may have had a larger impact. Because the advocacy and sentiment indicators were in line with the parasocial interaction findings, the researcher feel validated in his methods, but future studies could be better suited to finding statistically significant data by weighting their parasocial interaction indicators.

Another challenge was the variety in the number of posts by each brand. While post variety was touched on earlier, it bears further explanation. Because a range of brand sizes was needed for *H6*, which was a large foundation for this study, the researcher made sure brand size was a factor in choosing the research subjects. However, the selection of subjects could have thrown off the rest of the data as BurgerFi had a fraction of the posts the other brands had. This could have been solved by gathering posts from a longer date range, however that would not solve the problem of BurgerFi having fewer posts overall. Furthermore, the date range was decided on to include as little unique instances and events as possible while keeping relevant data that would not change over time. The researcher wanted their data to be applicable to a "normal" posting period for any brand. It is a possibility that increasing the time period from two weeks to a month could include

more statistically significant data, however the researcher feels confident in the number of posts gathered from Shake Shack and Smashburger fans to justify the decision.

Because the researcher was looking at third party brands that they are not involved with, there was some information that they were not privy too. And because they looked at this information months after it was posted, there are some possibilities that could have thrown off the numbers. The researcher has no way of knowing how many, if any, posts were deleted or hidden, this could influence the parasocial interaction rate. There is a chance that there were posts that were made and later either deleted or hidden. Furthermore, there is a chance that the brands themselves deleted posts they had made, and because they can block people from interacting with them, their self-policing and management could have altered the data. The researcher also did not have access to the brands' direct messages. There is a chance that personal messages could have included parasocial interaction, and all of the brands in some way, asked for the users to direct message them, mostly when they complained. Future researchers could benefit from partnering with the brands they study, though conflict of interest should be avoided.

As mentioned in the methods section, the researcher only gathered posts in which the brand was tagged at some point. This means there is a possibility that there were posts where the brand was being spoken to but not tagged. The researcher stands by his decision, but future research could benefit from finding a way to effectively search for untagged posts, while also filtering out posts that aren't intended to be an interaction.

To prevent bias, the only vetting for each brand was ensuring they had some sort of presence on Twitter, research into number of locations, and ensuring they were similar to each other in terms of product and category. Future researchers could benefit from

more stringent vetting to ensure that issues such as the image similarity, lack of asking for user-generated content, and fan-post quantity differences are addressed beforehand.

Finally, because this was a content analysis, the coders were restricted to only what they could see in the posts. Misunderstood social cues, inside jokes, missed references, and unidentified sarcasm could all possibly interfere with the data. The coders were instructed to stick to their code sheet and training sessions, and to only record what they could explicitly see/read. Future research would benefit from finding a way to confirm the meaning of uncertain posts, and possibly adding a human element with surveys or focus groups/interviews.

Future Implications

While few of the hypotheses were statistically significant, there is still a lot to learn from this study. The foundations for future research can be found here, and the researcher was pleased with the success of the data collection and verification of the parasocial interactions that were found. While some future research suggestions have been included to this point, there are a few more broad areas that can be covered.

This study's validated method for finding parasocial interaction in non-controlled social environments sets the foundation for future studies that may look at natural parasocial interaction. Future studies may even compare how it may differ from parasocial interaction in controlled settings. Looking at more fan posts, to more brands, and over a longer period could further solidify this method of identifying parasocial interaction.

Another area that deserves further investigation is the casual language category. Future studies could benefit from breaking casual language down into different categories

and adding expertise or authoritative language as a variable. This could lead to more statistically significant data, or at the very least, provide hypotheses for why casual language posts are not indicative of parasocial interaction rate in non-controlled social media. There is support for the hypothesis, but the results of this study showed that casual language may not have the effect on eliciting parasocial interaction that it has had in controlled settings.

Furthermore, future studies could benefit from comparing what a brand publicly posts to how a brand replies to comments. BurgerFi's lower reply rate could stem from their having a fraction of the overall number of posts from users that Smashburger and Shake Shack had. The researcher chose brands of various sizes to test *H6*, future studies may want to look at brands of a similar size to account for this possibility in the future, though Shake Shack with less than half the number of locations of Smashburger, had more posts made by fans overall. It is likely that brands will allocate resources to different areas, it is important for future professional strategy that brands know where to spend their time and resources.

Because there was little to no difference in terms of the brand's posts asking for user generated content, future studies would benefit from looking at a variety of brands that engage in sharing user-generated content in the event that they see a marked difference in parasocial interaction, since this study had brands that were spread apart in how often the solicited and shared user-generated content.

Another area that may deserve further research is post categorization and organizing information on replies based on what category of post the reply was made

towards. For instance, the table below shows the percent of a brand’s replies and personalized replies that were posted on comments that were complaints.

Table 12. *Brand Reply and personalization to complaint percentage*

Brand	% of replies to complaints	Number of replies to complaints	% of personalized replies to complaints	Number of personalized replies to complaints
BurgerFi	16%	2	9%	1
Shake Shack	28%	30	15.5%	14
SmashBurger	38%	34	25%	17

Looking at what type of posts a brand comments on in depth could reveal even stronger support for the hypotheses, it is hard for a brand to have a parasocial relationship with someone who views the brand negatively, but it would be interesting to see how the influence of replies and personalization change when complaints are taken out, or other categories are examined. It would be beneficial to research where brands should invest their time and resources.

Because this study was not focused on the *type* of post the user made, only whether it had a parasocial interaction trigger, a display of advocacy, and its sentiment, the researcher did not feel that they could filter parasocial interaction rate by the post’s category. The categories were set up as a step towards helping the coders find the sentiment score. Future studies would benefit from a more robust categorization system for posts, and filtering parasocial interaction rates by those categories. Furthermore, a

more robust categorization system could provide insights to brands on where their resources should be appropriated.

The concept of imagery with people and their faces affecting parasocial interaction deserves further investigation. Future studies would benefit from a wider sample of brands. Two of the brands were very similar in their use of people and faces, while all the brands utilize media.

Locality/familiarity is an area that deserves further research. More variety in brand size, use of surveys or interviews, and incorporating geography as a way of determining locality instead of number of locations could provide more statistically significant information. Future studies that includes interviews or surveys could lend support to the locality hypothesis, since the size of the brand could affect its social media following or budget, throwing off the content analysis.

Research Implications

While not statistically significant, the data does fall in line on most of the hypotheses. There is a good chance that future studies could mitigate the chances of non-statistically significant data in the future by following some of the outlined recommendations mentioned above.

One thing that this study does accomplish is to show that it is possible to effectively study active social media accounts and pages on a non-controlled platform to find parasocial interaction. This research design should open the doors for future research to be conducted without interviews or surveys, allowing those with fewer resources to study the phenomena of parasocial interaction. Furthermore, because of the success of the study in terms of identifying parasocial interaction, brand marketing teams can utilize this

information to study their audience, and the audience of their competitors to identify whether they are being effective in their social media engagement. This method of identifying parasocial interaction can be used to prove return on investment, as parasocial interaction is tied to positive effects for brands.

Another implication of this study is that there may be a contrast between effective parasocial interaction triggers in a controlled environment versus a natural environment, such as a brand's active Twitter page. It is possible that what is effective in a controlled experiment is seen as unnatural or not trustworthy in an unaltered environment. This study should be repeated in order to observe whether some of the data in that was opposite of the hypothesis is a trend that takes place outside of labs and surveys.

Parasocial interaction is complex and difficult to measure without directly asking a user/viewer what they are experiencing. It can, however, be examined and quantified. It is a topic that deserves future research and could have lasting implications in the world of social media marketing.

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APENDICES

Appendix A:

User Parasocial Interaction Response Sheet

Reference ID _____

Brand replies:

Did brand reply to comment? Y/N

If Yes, was the reply personalized to the comment? Y/N

Did the user reply to the brand? Y/N

Check off boxes of any para-social or advocacy responses found in the conversation with the brand.

Perceived Interactivity

- User positively recognizes that the brand replied to them
- User relates positively to brand's reply
- User predicts what brand will be doing next

Openness

- User self-discloses information not directly related to an eating occasion
- User relates positively to the information the brand shares

Similarity

- User speaks to brand as if speaking to a friend
- User compares themselves positively to brand
- User issues support for brand's goals
- User is excited for brand accomplishments
- User relates positively to brand's opinions or causes
- User relates positively to brand's problem solving
- User claims to be part of a group/nation/tribe related to or revolving around brand
- User uses "we" to describe themselves and the brand

Advocacy

- User actively promotes brand to public
- User tags friend in an effort to convince them of brand's value
- Expresses outright loyalty to the brand over any other competitor

Miscellaneous

- What was the content about?
 - General Inquiry
 - Advocacy to public
 - Expression of satisfactory experience
 - Complaint
 - Was Complaint resolved publicly? Y/N
 - Did another user defend the brand? Y/N
 - Location request
 - Free food request

- Miscellaneous
- What was the sentiment of the post?
 - Positive
 - Neutral
 - Negative

Appendix B:

Brand Parasocial Interaction Trigger Sheet

Post ID: _____

- Does the post have a casual tone? Y/N
- Is there an image present? Y/N
 - Does the image have people in it? Y/N
 - Are the faces clearly visible? Y/N
- Is the post directed to the fans specifically? Y/N
- Did the brand ask for user-generated content? Y/N
- Was the post a share of user-generated content? Y/N

VITA

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