

Friendship and Betrayal

An Exploratory Study of Parasocial Relationships and Brand- Related Content on YouTube

By

Leanne van der Struis (11388226)

Master's Thesis

Graduate School of Communication

Master's programme Communication Science

Dr. L.R. (Lotte) Salome

31 January 2018

Abstract

This thesis is an exploratory study, with the aim to provide insight in how brand-related content is perceived by viewers who experience a parasocial relationship with a YouTuber. This study is extending the line of research on the experience and development of parasocial relationships. In previous studies, this concept has been linked to media figures such as actors and presenters, but not yet to YouTubers. Moreover, this study provides practical insights on how brand-related content should or should not be incorporated in the YouTuber's videos, which might be valuable information to brands and YouTubers. A qualitative study was conducted that included 10 face-to-face interviews with a diverse sample of Dutch women between the ages of 19 and 23. All participants were devoted viewers of YouTubers from the beauty, fashion and lifestyle genre that create brand-related content from time to time. These YouTubers and their content were the focal point in the interviews. After transcribing, coding and analyzing the data, it can be concluded that all participants experienced a parasocial relationship with their favorite YouTuber. Also, there were four primary perceptions of the brand-related content found: the participants were either annoyed by the brand-related content, interested in the brand-related content, they perceived the brand-related content as questionable, or they perceived the brand-related content as neutral.

Keywords: parasocial relationships, brand-related content, YouTube, qualitative research

Introduction

In this day and age, we can become friends and grow attached to people we have never met, and with people we will probably never have an actual conversation with. Media can

give audiences the illusion of having an intimate and face-to-face interaction with media characters (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In turn, the more the audience members consume this media content, the more they will feel like they know the media characters, and they will start to form an opinion about them and make judgements about their personality (Chen, 2016). After a while, these apparent interactions could grow into what is called a parasocial relationship, where the media character has become a regular and dependable factor in the life of the audience member (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Although this phenomenon has been studied since 1956, it is still very relevant. The media landscape has changed drastically, nowadays people consume media everywhere they go and whenever they please, and the amount consumed knows no limit as people now also enjoy ‘binging’ their media content. The media characters that have been related to the concept of parasocial relationships in studies are figures such as presenters, actors, singers and celebrities (Chen, 2016). But, since the launch of YouTube in 2005, and since this platform has become ingrained into the media landscape and the modern society, YouTubers can also be added to that list of media characters that we follow and are exposed to.

YouTube is a video-sharing social media platform, where anyone “can upload and share personally produced videos, portions of movies and TV shows, and creative montages of any audio-visual material that is available on the TV or web” (Chen, 2016, p. 233). Moreover, for many YouTubers the platform is also the primary source of income. YouTubers make money off of the advertisements shown in their videos and through working together with brands. Since YouTube is a user-generated content platform, the YouTubers can incorporate brands in their videos in their own way, including their personal opinions and thoughts on the brand and its products. The overarching term for these videos is ‘brand-related user-generated content’ (Burmam, 2010), and it refers to “the handling of all kinds of voluntarily created and publicly distributed brand messages undertaken by non-marketers”

(Burmam, 2010, p. 2). When YouTubers create natural brand-related user-generated content, they might show products or mention certain brands, but are not getting paid for doing so. However, when brand-related user-generated content is sponsored, brands do actively ask the YouTuber for their contributions and participation, and they pay the YouTuber for their efforts (Burmam, 2010).

As this thesis is an exploratory study, the aim is to provide insight in the perceptions of brand-related content on YouTube, and especially how this brand-related content is perceived by viewers who experience a parasocial relationship with the YouTuber. Although it is quite feasible that viewers can experience parasocial relationships with YouTubers, there is not yet any research to proof this, let alone if this intimacy is experienced with YouTubers who also create brand-related content. Therefore, the first research question follows: do viewers experience parasocial relationships with YouTubers who create brand-related content? Subsequently, the second research question entails: how do viewers perceive brand-related content made by YouTubers who they experience a parasocial relationship with?

The concept of parasocial relationships has already been linked to fictional characters in movies and series, celebrities, comedians, TV presenters and so on, in previous studies. However, YouTubers are a different breed of media personae, and there is more research needed on their connection to the concept of parasocial relationships. Feeling connected to a fictional character following a script, might be different than feeling connected to a YouTuber who is (presumably) a real person sharing personal stories, ideas and opinions. The combination of reality and talking straight into the camera, to the viewers, might make YouTubers even better candidates for developing a parasocial relationship with. On the other hand, since YouTubers are working more and more with brands, this might also change the parasocial relationships, as viewers now have to figure out how trustworthy the YouTubers are, and whether they are perhaps biased or not.

Furthermore, this study explores if brand-related videos are still attractive and entertaining to its viewers, or if the content becomes boring or too commercial. On the other hand, perhaps brand-related content is not at all tedious. It might be the case that because the YouTuber is working together with a brand, the video also becomes more entertaining or informative, depending on how the YouTuber incorporates the brand. This is practical information that brands and YouTubers can possibly benefit from.

Theoretical framework

In this theoretical framework, the sensitizing concept ‘parasocial relationships’ will be discussed, and how this relationship might develop between YouTuber and devoted viewer. Then, some thoughts on the concept of uses and gratifications will be brought up, and how it may apply to experiencing a parasocial relationship. Finally, some predictions are made for how brand-related content might be perceived by devoted viewers who experience a parasocial relationship.

Parasocial relationships

Media consumers can be exposed to a variety of media figures, such as: singers, presenters, actors, authors, celebrities, social influencers, bloggers, vloggers and so on. While in some cases the spectator might have real interaction with the performer, for instance during a meet-and-greet or by replying to a comment of a fan on social media, for the most part it is a one-way line of communication where the performer solely communicates to its audience. However, the media are able to give the feeling of having a face-to-face relationship with the performer, as if they are part of one’s peers (Horton & Wohl, 1956). A spectator is able to become attached to a media character, and develop one-sided intimacy at a distance, without really knowing the performer off-screen (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This phenomenon is

referred to as a parasocial relationship (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This type of relationship is much like the real social relations in a spectator's life and arises, just as with interpersonal friendships, from social attractiveness (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Important to mention is that parasocial relationships may begin to develop during media consumption, but they also extend beyond the media exposure situation (Dibble, Hartmann & Rosaen, 2016). Also, when remaining involved, a parasocial relationship provides a framework within which may be added by fantasy (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

YouTube videos are very accessible and easy to incorporate in the viewers' daily routines, which makes YouTubers quite easy to follow. The YouTubers also offer a continuing relationship, as most of them upload new videos at specific times, and many even upload every day, so their appearance is a regular and dependable event (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This event might even be something viewers count on and look forward to as they do with interpersonal relationships (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Over time, as viewers get to know the YouTuber more, uncertainty about the YouTuber reduces, attraction increases, and a parasocial relationship becomes ongoing (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Of course, this relationship stems initially from a genuine social attraction to the YouTuber (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). So, it is this combination of the amount of exposure and the attraction, that leads to the development of a parasocial relationship (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). However, this intimate bond that loyal viewers feel is an illusion, and the accumulation of knowledge about the YouTuber and the intensification of loyalty remains one-sided (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Ingredients for a parasocial relationship

There are five factors that contribute to the development of a parasocial relationship, and that feeling of intimacy: parasocial interaction, self-disclosure, feeling included in their social life, perceived reality and multi-screening.

The first factor is that faux sense of mutual awareness that occurs during viewing, which is called parasocial interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956). What distinguishes this concept from the concept of parasocial relationships, is how these apparent interactions happen solely during the media consumption, while the parasocial relationships can be experienced long after the consumption has ended (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Parasocial interactions are most appropriate for describing media figures who directly address the viewer, such as newscasters and presenters (Giles, 2002). But these interactions are also common in comedy, when a comedian ‘breaks the fourth wall’ and engages the audience directly (Giles, 2002). Of course, YouTubers almost always talk directly into the camera to their viewers. Often times, the viewer will see them being engaged with others, but then they will face the viewer again, use the mode of direct address, and talk as if they are conversing personally and privately. Many YouTubers try to maintain a flow of small talk which gives the impression that they are keeping a conversation going, and that they are responding to and sustaining the contributions of an invisible viewer (Horton & Wohl, 1956). For example, they might say something like: “I’m doing this today, come along with me guys” or “it honestly feels like I’m hanging out with friends”. Also, YouTubers often times start their video by saying something along the lines of “hi friends”, or they might end their video by saying “see you tomorrow” or “I love you guys”. It is because of these types of remarks, that viewers can perceive the YouTuber as an intimate conversational partner (Dibble, Hartmann & Rosaen, 2016).

Self-disclosure is another important element that creates intimacy, and it plays an important role in forming parasocial relationships (Chung & Cho, 2014). Viewers get to know a YouTuber in somewhat the same way they get to know their chosen friends: through direct observation and interpretation of their appearance, gestures, voice, and their conversation and conduct in a variety of situations (Horton & Wohl, 1956). YouTubers, especially in their vlogs, show (parts of) their real life, and moments and conversations with the people close to

them, which can get very personal. Also, YouTubers share their own opinions and viewpoints on topics that are important to them, and sometimes the topics that are brought up are quite sensitive. With every new video, the devoted viewers learn more about the YouTuber, their personality, their life, and their viewpoints. In time, they might come to believe they know the YouTuber more intimately and profoundly than others do, that they understand their character, and they come to appreciate their values and motives (Horton & Wohl, 1956). It also creates an accumulation of shared past experiences, which gives additional meaning to any new experiences that the YouTuber shares; a meaningfulness that won't get noticed by a casual viewer (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Thirdly, media figures also create intimacy by how they treat their supporting cast as a group of close intimates, and how all cast members are addressed by their first names, or special nicknames (Horton & Wohl, 1956). The cast members also develop, or have imputed to them, character traits which they indulge in and exploit with every new episode that airs (Horton & Wohl, 1956). On YouTube, the 'supporting cast' consists of the YouTuber's real friends and family members, or other YouTubers. But, most importantly, it consists of actual personalities. Of course, the YouTuber is going to be close with them as real moments from their actual lives are shared through their videos. This way, devoted viewers accumulate not only an historical picture of who everyone is, but they come to believe that they are included, as they are familiar with the nicknames, and they are in on the jokes and the references to moments from the past (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Someone who consumes this YouTuber's content for the first time, will not get the meaningfulness behind the little things said or done between the YouTuber and their loved ones (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Another key element in the development of a parasocial relationship, is the perceived reality (Giles, 2002). The media figure has to present a credible persona, because the viewer has to be able to make person, or character, judgments about the media figure before agreeing

to a parasocial relationship (Giles, 2002). For example, figures such as newscasters, presenters and celebrities need to appear authentic, because this is part of their appeal (Giles, 2002). It is also an essential ingredient for the appreciation of soap operas (Giles, 2002). Moreover, perceived reality results in a positive increase in spatial presence, which entails being immersed in the media content (Shafer, Carbonara, Popova, 2011). When someone is highly present during their media consumption, they experience their peak in the enjoyment of that content (Shafer, Carbonara, Popova, 2011). As for YouTubers; they are expected to be their true selves, and to share their honest opinions. Of course, there are many instances when videos will be somewhat scripted or rehearsed, which could result in the YouTuber losing that authenticity. Also, YouTubers don't tell their viewers everything and their videos ultimately only show a small part out of their 24 hour day. So, although YouTubers are (supposedly) being themselves, and sharing their personal opinions and stories, the authenticity is something that can be debated on, and might differ from video to video and between YouTubers.

Lastly, there is the experience of 'multi-screening' (Dias, 2016) which, especially in this social media era, is an interesting concept when looking at the development of parasocial relationships. Multi-screening can be explained as "the articulated use of one or more screened devices without establishing a hierarchy between them; this use may be simultaneous, sequential or intercalary; and the activities performed on each device may be connected or unrelated" (Dias, 2016, p. 680). Besides being subscribed to YouTubers, many viewers are also able to follow them on their other social media channels such as Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter. Social media are altering the way that people experience parasocial relationships, as these platforms provide media figures with even more opportunities to share personal information and glimpses from their life with their audience (Bond, 2016). A significant positive relationship was found between exposure to media figures on Twitter and

the strength of parasocial relationships (Bond, 2016). It was also found that reality television viewing and the use of social networking sites to interact with the characters on the show, were positively associated with parasocial relationships between those media characters and viewers (Chung & Cho, 2014). This suggests that following a YouTuber on social media increases the viewer's feelings of connectedness to that media persona, intensifying the parasocial relationship.

The uses and gratifications approach

According to the uses and gratifications approach, people are goal directed in their behavior, they are active media users, and they are aware of their needs and select media to gratify these needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). Our motives for media use also may moderate or mediate the effects of various media exposures; as media messages cannot influence someone who has no use for them (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). When looking at parasocial relationships with YouTubers from this approach, a few questions arise: why is a viewer subscribed to a certain YouTuber? What makes watching their videos so entertaining? What needs are met by viewing their content? On YouTube, the options are endless. But a media consumer specifically and consciously selects the videos they want to watch, and subscribes to the channels they find interesting (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). Ultimately, this might lead to the development of a parasocial relationship. But before this connection is formed, a lot of time is spent on watching the videos of this media figure. This is why it also might be interesting to find out about the motivations for watching certain YouTube videos, and why someone subscribes to a specific YouTuber.

Perhaps parasocial interaction is a gratification that media consumers seek from the media. Giles (2002) found that soap opera characters frequently reminded the viewers of people they knew, and that viewers used the characters' situations and behavior as ways of understanding their own lives; a place to seek guidance. Parasocial interaction was used as a

source of alternative companionship, resulting from a lack of companionship in their own social life and their dependency on television as a compensation for their loneliness (Giles, 2002). On the other hand, maybe viewers do not subscribe to YouTubers to experience parasocial interaction, but for reasons such as to get inspired, informed, entertained, or to escape from their own daily lives. Viewers subscribe to the channels that interest them, and to the YouTubers they are attracted to. Assuming that YouTubers create content they actually like; viewer and YouTuber have shared interests, which is something that bonds them right off the bat. This may still lead to the development of a parasocial relationship, even though this may not have been the intent. On the other hand, having these specific motivations for watching YouTubers, comes with certain expectations for the kinds of videos the YouTuber 'should' make. If the YouTuber fails to meet those expectations, the viewer might ultimately stop watching their videos, out of confusion, disgust, anger, or boredom (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Monetization of parasocial relationships

Because developing a parasocial relationship with a YouTuber is very feasible, YouTubers have become very appealing to brands and firms. Those parasocial relationships can be very influential, as devoted viewers wish to receive advice from the YouTubers and buy the products that they recommend, just as they rely on close others for information, advice and approval (Chung & Cho, 2014). YouTubers can be very effective brand endorsers, and many have become just that. Since the beginning of YouTube in 2005, a lot has changed on the platform. Nowadays, many YouTubers are working together with brands and firms to create brand-related content, and have made YouTube their job. As a result, YouTube has become a lot more professional and commercial. Although there are still many videos that are unscripted and unguarded, more and more videos are uploaded that look just like commercials.

The commercialization of YouTube videos and of YouTubers who are creating brand-related content, can be perceived in a variety of ways. First of all, the devoted viewers might dislike the brand-related content, as the authenticity and intimacy get lost in the formal talk about a certain brand or product. Viewers might skip the videos that are brand-related or fast-forward to the unsponsored part of the videos. Perhaps a certain sponsorship might even make the loyal subscriber completely change their opinion about the YouTuber. In some ways it might feel like a betrayal, as there was this reliability and this friend-like relationship between viewer and YouTuber, which the YouTuber now exploits to make money. Viewers might even ask themselves if it's really their own opinion that they're sharing or just commercial talk. It has been found that a scandal involving an actor negatively influenced people's parasocial relationship with him (Hu, 2016). They also found that the stronger the parasocial relationship was with the actor, the more of a 'parasocial break-up' the participants experienced after the scandal was introduced (Hu, 2016). This might even mean that the devoted viewer of a YouTuber could experience some type of a 'parasocial break-up' after they become aware of the sponsored nature of the content. On the other hand, it could also be that viewers really enjoy the brand-related content, depending on how the YouTuber incorporates that content in their videos.

Methods

Because the research question is focused on the underlying views on how videos and YouTubers are perceived, qualitative research is conducted. Interviews were found to be most suited as the research method for this thesis because, first of all, this method provides rich and detailed data about individual experiences and perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Secondly, this method allows for probing and asking unplanned questions due to what the participants might bring up, which is very complementary to the explorative aim of this

research (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Lastly, with interviews the researcher has a lot of control over the data produced, which increases the likelihood of generating data that is actually useful and will help answer the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Sampling strategy and sample characteristics

For this study a purposive sampling method was used, as specific members of the population were chosen to participate in the research (Tongco, 2007). The participants were recruited via Instagram, because YouTube is a rather anonymous social media platform, with usernames that consist of nicknames, symbols and numbers instead of real names. Whereas on Instagram, most users use their real name and the platform is overall better to get in contact with people. Messages were sent to those who commented neutral or positive feedback underneath a post on the Instagram account of a YouTuber. For example, this could be something along the lines of “I like your outfit” to “I can’t wait for your next video”. To make sure the participants were able to meet face-to-face for these interviews, only the Instagram accounts of Dutch YouTubers were consulted.

Furthermore, the participants needed to meet two additional requirements to be considered for this research. First of all, they had to experience a parasocial relationship with the YouTuber. Although this was something that would only fully be uncovered during the interviews, there were already some elements to look for that might indicate a certain parasocial relationship. The fact that they followed the YouTuber on Instagram, and thus participated in multiple screenings, was one indicator. Another was that they commented something positive (or neutral) underneath their post, also suggesting that they like the YouTuber (or at least care enough to try to reach out). Finally, as an additional step, they were directly asked via Instagram messaging who they watch on YouTube and who they consider to be their favorite YouTubers. This last question makes sure that the participants do actually follow YouTubers on YouTube and watch their videos on a regular basis. Moreover, this

additional question was also needed in preparation for the interviews, to come up with specific examples of videos the YouTuber has made, just in case the participant wouldn't come up with their own examples.

This leads to the second requirement to be considered for this research, which is that their favorite YouTuber has to make brand-related content from time to time. To make sure that the YouTubers produce this type of content, solely the Instagram accounts of Dutch YouTubers in the beauty, fashion and lifestyle genre were consulted, as this is a genre that is well-known for its collaborations with brands and sponsored videos. A selection of YouTubers was made, all with over 100.000 subscribers, to make sure that they were appealing to brands and to make it more likely that they might promote (their own) products in their videos. A few YouTubers from that selection were Beautygloss, Anna Nooshin, Manon Tilstra and D is for Dazzle.

The selected YouTubers create daily or weekly vlogs where the YouTuber takes their audience with them through their daily activities and routines. Furthermore, they also create videos where they sit in front of the camera, and stay in one position talking about specific products or topics. Imperatively, the unwritten rule is that the YouTubers in this genre are claimed and expected to be themselves and to share opinions and stories that are their own. Brands and products are incorporated in these videos in a variety of ways, but there are three relevant categories of brand-related content that can be identified. First of all, natural brand-related content (Burmans, 2010), which refers to the videos the YouTuber is not getting paid for, but these videos do feature certain products or services that are given to them for free. Then, there is the sponsored brand-related content (Burmans, 2010), where the YouTuber is getting paid to work with a brand in a video. Lastly, there is the self-promo, where the YouTuber is promoting their own products or merchandise.

Around 100 messages were sent, and only a select group of women replied and was

actually able and willing to meet-up for an interview. Also, there were still some women who were messaged but who turned out not to meet all of the requirements. Ultimately, 10 Dutch women between the ages of 19 and 23 were recruited (see table 1 for an overview of the characteristics of the participants). All participants lived in The Netherlands, but they were from different parts of the country; from big cities to more rural areas. Also, the women had different educational backgrounds; from studying communication, to accountancy, to nursing, and so on. Finally, it was also made sure that the participants differed in who they followed on YouTube and who they considered to be their favorites. All of this has resulted in a variety of perspectives and very rich information. With the 10 interviews that were conducted it can be stated that the saturation point has been reached, as the last two interviews clearly contained overlapping information with the preceding interviews.

Table 1. *Characteristics of the participants*

Name (pseudonym)	Age	Place of residency	Education	Favorite YouTuber
Bella	19	Spijkenisse	Media and entertainment management	Queen of Jetlags
Charlotte	19	Schinnen	Accountancy	Beautygloss
Daisy	21	Groenlo	Fashion and media styling	Negin Mirsalehi
Demi	21	Schiedam	International relations	Bon Color
Emily	19	Ottoland	Teaching assistant	Annic van Wonderen
Megan	23	Leiden	Political science	Zoëlla
Naomi	21	Zwijndrecht	Nursing	Beautygloss
Rose	19	Franeker	Multi-media and design	D is for Dazzle
Roxanne	23	Rotterdam	Pedagogy	Anna Nooshin
Taylor	19	Deventer	Art and economics	Anna Nooshin

Procedure of data gathering

The participants were the ones to decide where they would like to meet up for the interview and when they would be available; making it as convenient for them as possible. Meeting the participants face-to-face is important in qualitative research, as the researcher can get a much better idea of what the participants are really saying (Braun & Clarke, 2013). It allows the researcher to focus on how the participants speak: their tone of voice, their speed etcetera. It also gives the opportunity to pay attention to their body language. Furthermore, meeting the participants in their own environment is important, as this is where the researcher is closest to their daily lives and where the participants are most likely to feel comfortable. This generates opinions that reflect their perspectives in a good way, making the data as credible as possible (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Another way the participants were comforted was by keeping the interviews quite informal and by making sure that they knew they were talking to someone with a prolonged engagement in the field (Creswell & Miller, 2000); someone very familiar with the YouTubers and their videos. These factors made the participants be more authentic and talk more openly about their opinions and viewpoints, especially since they are asked about this possibly intimate phenomenon of experiencing a relationship with a mediated persona.

All the interviews were conducted in Dutch and they were semi-structured (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The initial interview guide created for this research was followed in every interview. However, there were YouTuber-specific questions added in every interview that were only asked to those following that YouTuber. Additionally, there were many unplanned questions asked as a result of what the participants brought up during the interviews. The first topic in the interview guide focused on the concept of uses and gratifications. The aim for this topic was to find out why the participants watch YouTube videos and their motivations for following specific YouTubers. In the second topic the focus was on the concept of parasocial

relationships. The aim for this topic was to find out if the participants experienced this type of relationship with the YouTuber and how they experienced it. In the third topic the participants' perceptions of brand-related content were addressed. The aim here was to find out what they thought of brand-related content, and if it added to the enjoyment or if it took away from the enjoyment of watching their videos.

Right before conducting the interviews, the participants were informed that the interviews would be audio-recorded, to ensure the accuracy of their statements and to be able to insert quotes in the results section. The accuracy of their statements was also ensured due to member checking; by bringing the interpretation of their statements back to them, to confirm the credibility of the information (Creswell & Miller, 2000). All participants were also informed that their names wouldn't be mentioned in the study, to protect their anonymity. Finally, the average duration of the interviews was 52 minutes.

Analysis of the data

Because of the explorative aim of this research, the grounded theory methodology was used to guide the research in producing theory; theory that is heavily grounded in the data and systematically gathered and analyzed (Strauss, 1987). To visualize all the different ideas generated in this research in a concise and accessible manner, a concept indicator model was created. This type of conceptual modeling is very suited when aiming to produce theory (Strauss, 1987). But, before this model could be realized, the data had to be thoroughly analyzed. By means of peer debriefing (Creswell & Miller, 2000), as another measure to assure the credibility of the research, feedback from research peers was generated on the data analysis (as well as on the data collection).

All interviews were transcribed in Word and then coded and analyzed in ATLAS.ti. This program was used because it is a useful tool for managing data and to increase the efficiency in the process of coding and analyzing (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Coding is

important, as codes are the building blocks of any analysis; they condense, summarize and potentially give some analytical insights into the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The coding process started out with complete open coding (Strauss, 1987). Segments, or quotations, were made whenever a little subject, question or example had ended. Then, that segment would be focused on again, but more closely. Moreover, everything said received a code; both the topics that were brought up and whatever was said about the topics. The theoretical framework and research question were used as guidance in coding the data. For example, when a participant was asked about why they follow a certain YouTuber, it was coded as 'uses and gratifications' and as 'motivations for following YouTuber'.

After the open coding process, it was time to look for structure and variation by doing a more focused coding (Braun & Clarke, 2013). First, the codes that captured the same things but were formulated slightly different, were merged. Second, there were three families made with code manager: 'uses and gratifications', 'experiencing parasocial relationships' and 'perceptions of brand-related content'. The 1020 codes were dragged in one of the three families (leaving some codes behind that did not fit in either one). The decision for this distinction was based on the structure of the interviews and what was found in the data. For example, the code 'watching to relax' is a motivation for watching YouTube. So, this code was dragged into the 'uses and gratifications' family. The codes within this family had quite some overlap with the other two families, as these codes also indicated what the YouTube videos (including the brand-related ones) should or should not be like, just as they sometimes indicated the experience of a parasocial relationship. The code family 'experiencing parasocial relationships' was used to build the argument that the participants did actually experience a parasocial relationship with their favorite YouTuber.

Third, through a process of memo writing (Braun & Clarke, 2013), the codes within the 'perceptions of brand-related content' family were clustered into multiple categories.

These categories were rearranged, extended and made more concise, until four dimensions were left that captured all the different viewpoints, and all the relevant information needed to answer the research question. From the four dimensions, four pairs of indicators were assembled which were grounded in the data; ultimately converging into the created concept indicator model (see figure 1).

Results

Experiencing parasocial relationships

Before diving into the concept indicator model, it can be stated that all participants experienced a parasocial relationship with at least one of the YouTubers they followed. All five ingredients discussed in the theoretical framework were found in the data. The first ingredient was that faux sense of mutual awareness that YouTubers can create with their videos, and that give viewers the feeling of hanging out with a friend. This ingredient was nicely demonstrated by Taylor when she said: “I like watching beauty videos... When for example Vera Camilla does her make-up in the video it is nice to kind of get ready together.” Another example is when Emily mentioned: “When you watch her Vlogmas, it’s like she is a girlfriend of yours and that you are really going with her to her work. Last year she did an internship at a cinema, and I don’t know, it just seemed like I was actually tagging along. And when she opened an advent calendar it was like I was receiving it too.”

The second ingredient for a parasocial relationship was self-disclosure. All participants agreed that the YouTubers don’t show everything, but they do believe that the YouTubers are sharing a lot, and they find them to be very open and sincere in the personal things they do share. Because of this self-disclosure, as a viewer you become part of important milestones in the YouTuber’s life. Megan said: “With her... I was there when she got married, her first child, her second child... You just feel like you know her kind of.” Also, through self-

disclosure, viewers become more aware of the YouTuber's likes and dislikes. Demi said: "The funny thing is that with these YouTubers I would know what kind of present to buy for them. Well, I think that shows you know someone pretty well." But, self-disclosure also makes viewers connect with them on a deeper level. Bella, who also has had experiences with panic attacks, said: "Queen of Jetlags talks about everything and shows everything. She is not always completely done-up. She also tells about personal things, likes those panic attacks, or that she misses her child... she doesn't only show the fun stuff."

The third ingredient, as explained in the theoretical framework, was the feeling of being a part of the YouTuber's social interactions captured in their videos. The participants showed great interest in seeing their favorite YouTubers with their loved ones. Daisy said for example: "I really like seeing those types of things, especially when she is just hanging on the couch, watching Netflix, and that her fiancé is bringing her food and that they sit on the couch together, or when he is gaming or something..." Bella also said she likes seeing the YouTuber surrounded by loved ones: "With her you see everything... then, suddenly, her boyfriend comes along in the vlog, and when she is with Bibi or with her baby..."

Fourthly, to experience a parasocial relationship, the YouTuber has to appear like a sincere and credible persona. Like mentioned before, the participants are aware that the YouTubers don't show everything and that the videos are only a very small part of their day. However, overall they do believe that their favorite YouTubers are sincere and credible. This is demonstrated very nicely by Charlotte, when she said: "With Mascha it's really nice, because I feel like I know her. I mean, obviously I don't, but to me she seems very sincere, and that is why you trust her more, sort of. Pretty weird..." Also, Roxanne said: "With Beautygloss I feel like what you see is what you get, so that is what I really like about her."

Lastly, all participants followed their favorite YouTubers on Instagram, and some were also interested in the YouTuber's autobiographical books or their appearances in other

media. Thus, the final ingredient, referred to as multi-screening in the theoretical framework, was also present among the participants.

Now that has been established that the participants experienced a parasocial relationship, the focus should return to the primary concept derived from the research question, which is grounded in the data: perceptions of brand-related content on YouTube. After analyzing the data, four dimensions were uncovered within this concept. These dimensions show the variety of perceptions in the data, and were labeled: perceiving brand-related content as annoying, perceiving brand-related content as interesting, perceiving brand-related content as questionable, and perceiving brand-related content as neutral. Every dimension has two indicators, which are also grounded in the data, showing once more a range in viewpoints. In the following sections the concept indicator model (see figure 1), encompassing all the perceptions found in the data, is explained. The order in which the perceptions are discussed is arbitrary. Moreover, the participants were at times found to express a combination of perceptions, depending on which YouTuber they referred to and which video.

Perceptions of brand-related content on YouTube

Perceiving brand-related content as annoying. Even though the participants experience a parasocial relationship with their favorite YouTubers, some did express irritation when talking about the brand-related content that they produced. Over all, they didn't consider all brand-related content to be annoying, as it very much depends on how the YouTuber incorporates it in their videos. There are two indicators that explain when the brand-related content was perceived as annoying. The first one is labeled as 'brand-related content doesn't seem personal or sincere'. The second indicator is called 'brand-related content isn't useful or entertaining'.

Brand-related content doesn't seem personal or sincere. This indicator ties in nicely

with the experience of having a parasocial relationship with the YouTuber. The participants feel like they know the YouTuber, meaning they know their likes and dislikes, what brands they love and which ones they don't really care for. They know what products the YouTuber actually uses because they follow them in the vlogs and on Instagram. They know when a brand or product really fits the YouTuber and their channel and the types of videos they make. When a brand or product doesn't fit the YouTuber and it doesn't make sense on their channel, that is when participants can get annoyed by brand-related content as it seems insincere and impersonal. Rose said for example: "Yes, I don't like that one bit. It just doesn't fit them. Look, when you're a make-up artist and you work together with make-up brands, okay, that fits your channel. But a vlogger working together with Oral B... no." And Daisy mentioned: "Recently I saw a vlog from Annic and she was talking about this diaper bag, and I just thought it looked horrible while she was going on and on about how nice she thought it was. But if I look at all the other stuff she buys, this just didn't fit with that. So, I thought it was very weird."

Moreover, the brand-related content can also be annoying when the video is overly commercial and feels staged, and the YouTuber loses its sincerity in that way. This is the case when the sponsored part in their videos is too long, when the YouTuber talks too much about one specific product, or when they talk about a brand with seemingly fake enthusiasm. Taylor demonstrated this when she said: "They can make sponsored videos, sure. It's just that, they should 100% believe in that product and they should be truly enthusiastic about it. Because sometimes, YouTubers jump really quickly from real to fake, and then you just know that they get paid to say something." Also, Charlotte mentioned: "She does this sponsored video with Fanta once a year and I absolutely despise those videos. It is so staged. That's how Fanta wants it. I don't watch those. Also, she's vegan, because of her health, but in my opinion that just contradicts each other..."

Brand-related content isn't useful or entertaining. This indicator ties in with the uses and gratifications approach. The participants made clear that the main reasons for watching their favorite YouTubers are: because their videos are entertaining or useful. Brand-related content can be as well, but when it's not done the right way its usefulness or entertainment value decreases. The participants mentioned that it's fine when YouTubers get paid to show certain products, but when they don't make the context entertaining or explain how the product works or what it can do for them, then it becomes annoying. Charlotte explained this when she said: "She will say that she is going to test the product, but in reality you will never see the product appear again. But she did mention the product and showed it on camera... That is really annoying."

Another example is when the brand or product mentioned is not something they would enjoy, because perhaps it's not their style or it's too expensive and so on. Roxanne said: "Well, that happens a lot with Anna Nooshin. She will test a certain product, often times very expensive products that I know I'm never going to buy. So, it's really nice that she says that it's a really good product, but when I'm never going to buy it I don't have to know about it. So, then I skip it." Also, Naomi mentioned the following: "I think I would start to enjoy the videos less if it would only revolve around those products. I watch her vlogs to see her life, not the products."

Perceiving brand-related content as interesting. On the other side of the coin, when brand-related content was done well, the participants were really enjoying the videos. They gave many examples of videos where the YouTuber incorporated the brand-related content in such a way, that it was very entertaining and interesting and overall enjoyable to watch. The first indicator that explains when brand-related content can be perceived as interesting is: brand-related content seems personal and sincere. The second indicator is: brand-related content is useful or entertaining.

Brand-related content seems personal and sincere. When a YouTuber is making a sponsored video, showing products they received for free, talking about their own products for the purpose of self-promo, or any other way of (indirectly) receiving monetary or material gains from their videos, they should do it in such a way that it is fitting to them. They should remain personal and sincere. Taylor gave a nice example of a sponsored video she really liked: “Teske has done a sponsored video where she was invited on a balloon ride. That was really cool to see, because you could see it made her genuinely really happy. Then, when she would say how great that trip was or that balloon ride, you believed her because she actually genuinely loved it, you know.” Demi gave another example: “Not long ago, I thought it was pretty funny... She has a cat, whom she always buys organic cat food for. And that brand had given her an advent calendar with these organic cat treats, for a giveaway. But that fits her, because she has made the decision to feed her cat organic food, so it made sense to give something like that away.”

Content is useful or entertaining. Another way of keeping the brand-related content interesting is by giving it value. The participants mentioned they like brand-related videos when the YouTuber tests the product and shows how it works and all the things it can do. Also, the brands and products featured should be something the participants actually might like and it should fit their own interests. Naomi said: “For example with that hair tool, that was sponsored, but I like it and I want to know how it works. So, even though it is sponsored, she does also explain how it works, so then I don’t mind.” And Emily gave another example: “That video was done with Karwei for example... Annic had made a vlog wherein she showed a make-over of her garden. Really fun! That just interests me. And yes, everything shown was from Karwei, but then that doesn’t even really bother me.”

Perceiving brand-related content as questionable. Another perception of brand-related content went hand-in-hand with either finding the video enjoyable or annoying. This

one refers to perceiving those videos as questionable, and being critical of the content or the YouTuber. In these instances, when the participants referred to brand-related videos, they would either be questioning if that content was personal and sincere, or the second indicator, they would be questioning if that content was actually useful.

Doubts if brand-related content is personal and sincere. When a YouTuber produces a brand-related video and is making money from that video, or when the YouTuber does an unboxing of products they received for free, participants revealed that they sometimes wonder if the video is still personal and sincere. They can question if their opinion is honest or if they may be afraid to say what they really think; not wanting to offend a brand that was so kind to send them free stuff. Or, they feel like the YouTuber may be biased, as they are receiving money for being positive about the brand. They can also wonder if the product is actually something the YouTuber would use. Do they honestly believe in the product, or are they just creating content because they didn't want to pass up on working with a brand, and the income that comes with it? Roxanne said: "I don't think this happens a lot, but I do believe that they sometimes think that it's just too great an opportunity to pass up, so they promote a product they do not 100% believe in." And Rose said: "That sponsored video about Rabobank... I watched that, and I did wonder: does she even actually use Rabobank herself?"

Doubts if brand-related content is useful. When the intent to watch a video is to find out more about a product (how it works, what it does and so on), the participants at times pointed out to be unsure about how useful the YouTuber's information really is when the video is sponsored. Megan mentioned for example: "When they are sponsored by, I don't know, a lipstick brand or something, and they show you the product... You know it will be edited and that they filter out the parts where the product doesn't look as good. Then, when they mention that they are sponsored by them, I just wonder if it really looks as good in real life as it does in the video." Demi was also in doubt, as she explained: "If I like the brand then

it does interest me to see what new products they have brought out. However, I don't attach a lot of value to what she thinks of those products, because she has maybe used that product once, and after using something once you don't know if it works on your skin."

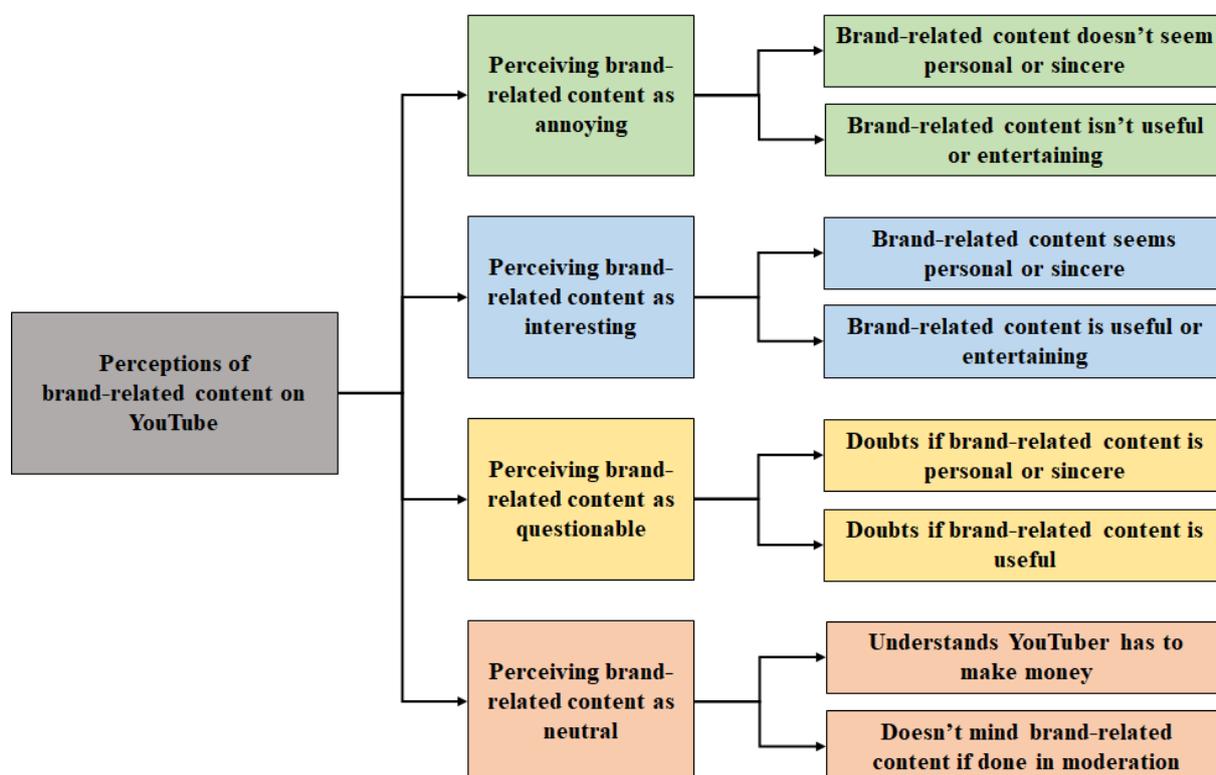
Perceiving brand-related content as neutral. The last dimension refers to when the participants perceived the brand-related content with no particular strong feelings. They would talk about those videos like they didn't really mind. If it was an entirely sponsored video surrounding one specific brand or product, they could just skip that video altogether, as there were many other videos to come that wouldn't be sponsored. Or, if there was a small sponsored part within a vlog, they would either just skip that part or keep watching anyway. They wouldn't let it impact them as much. This perception was again divided by two indicators, the first being: understands YouTuber has to make money. The second indicator was labeled: doesn't mind brand-related content if done in moderation.

Understands YouTuber has to make money. Many times, the participants pointed out how understanding they were of the brand-related content their favorite YouTubers made. They understood that in this day and age, sponsored videos are just part of YouTube. Also, they obviously like the YouTuber, so they actually grant them that money they make with their videos and the free products they receive. Charlotte said: "They have to do this to earn money. I completely understand that. If you want to make a living as a YouTuber you have to make some sponsored videos, period. I'm not that sickening that I also want her to pick up some shifts in the catering industry, work her butt off until 10 PM, as she otherwise wouldn't get by, and then still demand a video from her as well. No, of course not." And Megan made a similar statement when she said: "It comes with the territory, so you sort of tolerate it. It is simply their job, so they make money... and it's not like I would be happier if there were no sponsorships or something. It's okay that they do it."

Doesn't mind brand-related content if done in moderation. Another way the brand-

related content was justified by the participants, was when they considered those sponsored parts to be short, or when they considered the overall amount of brand-related videos to still be acceptable. All in all, the participants don't mind the brand-related content as much, yet. If the amount of sponsored videos, or the duration of the sponsored bits, would increase, then they might start to think differently. Rose mentioned for example: "Well... I don't particularly like it, but it just depends if it is the entire video or one minute, just some surreptitious advertising in between scenes..." And Bella agreed, by saying: "I just watch it. It doesn't ever take that long. If it is an entire video about the same thing then I would stop watching pretty fast. But if it is quickly mentioned, just somewhere in the middle... Well, that's okay by me."

Figure 1. *Concept indicator model of the perceptions of brand-related content on YouTube*



Conclusion & Discussion

The aim of this thesis was to provide insight in the perceptions of brand-related content on YouTube, and especially how this brand-related content is perceived by viewers who experience a parasocial relationship with the YouTuber. The first research question, whether viewers experience parasocial relationships with YouTubers who create brand-related content, can be confirmed. Therefore, this study adds to the research on parasocial relationships. Subsequently, an attempt was made to answer the second research question, which entailed: how do viewers perceive brand-related content made by YouTubers who they experience a parasocial relationship with?

Four primary perceptions of brand-related content were uncovered. Firstly, brand-related content was at times found to be annoying. This was the case when the brands or products featured were not personalized, or when the video was highly staged or commercial, which caused the YouTuber to not seem sincere. Also, when the products featured were not useful in any way, or when the format of the video in which the YouTuber incorporated the brand was not entertaining at all, it was perceived as annoying.

However, brand-related content was also perceived as interesting in many instances. This depended on whether the YouTuber incorporated the brand-related content in such a way that it seemed personal and sincere, like the YouTuber really loved the product and would actually use it. Otherwise, if the video was useful or entertaining and in accordance with their own interests, that also made the video remain enjoyable.

Thirdly, brand-related content was at times perceived as questionable. Because YouTubers are getting paid to work with brands, the participants are in doubt if the YouTuber actually uses the product and is truly a fan of the brand, or if they are just pretending to love it to receive an income. Also, because the YouTuber might be biased, the participants question if the information about the product or brand given is accurate and honest, and thereby useful.

Finally, sometimes the brand-related content just does not evoke a strong reaction. Participants expressed themselves at times in a rather neutral manner, because they were understanding of the fact that YouTube is a paying job in this day and age, and that brand-related content is simply part of it now. Also, as long as the brand-related content is done in moderation they don't seem to mind it either.

All in all, incorporating brand-related content does not necessarily mean the video loses its usefulness or its entertainment value, or that YouTubers lose their credibility or authenticity. This study offers practical recommendations for brands and YouTube creators, on how to incorporate brand-related content in YouTube videos. First of all, YouTubers should make brand-related content that makes sense on their channel; meaning the brand should fit the interests of the audience and match up with their own interests. Moreover, YouTubers should be selective in the brands they decide to work with and stray away from working with conflicting brands. Additionally, YouTubers should make the brand-related content personal, entertaining and/or useful. Also, YouTubers should be sincere when talking about a brand and they should actually use the products they recommend. Finally, YouTubers shouldn't become too commercial; meaning that sponsorships shouldn't be too obvious or staged, YouTubers should remain realistic and natural, and there should be enough content uploaded that is not brand-related.

These recommendations are addressed towards the YouTuber, as they are mainly the ones being judged by the viewers for the content they put out. However, brands should play into these recommendations as well, by selecting the right YouTubers to promote their brand and by making sure the products are tailored to the YouTuber's personality, lifestyle and audience, as their aim is also to keep the viewer engaged and interested in the video. For some types of sponsored videos brands might even be able to use these recommendations to coach the YouTuber, in order to achieve successful marketing.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

When determining the transferability of the results of this research, so to which extent the results can be ‘transferred’ to other groups of people or contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2013), some limitations should be addressed. Firstly, the underrepresentation of the younger viewers. Although the sample is quite varied, the data would probably be even richer if some early adolescents were included in the sample as well. It has been found that the development of parasocial relationships has special importance for teens (Cohen, 2003). At this age they become highly interested in the lives of celebrities, more so than at any other age, and given their general emotional vulnerability, they should experience stronger parasocial relationships than older media consumers (Cohen, 2003). Subsequently, because they experience the parasocial relationship differently, this might also influence how they perceive the brand-related content. An explanation for the underrepresentation of the younger viewers might be that they were not comfortable with the recruitment process used in this research, and therefore did not respond to the messages sent via Instagram.

Furthermore, the sample in this research only includes women. It has been found that women tend to be more invested in their interpersonal relationships and they also experience stronger parasocial relationships than men (Cohen, 2003). Therefore, although the audience of the beauty, fashion and lifestyle genre probably consists mostly of women, it would have enriched the data to have a male perspective. This ties in to another limitation, which is that this research solely focusses on the beauty, fashion and lifestyle genre on YouTube. However, there are many other genres to be considered for future research, such as gaming videos on YouTube for example. Also, it might be interesting to look at non-Dutch YouTubers, as there are much bigger and more influential creators overseas, who are more appealing to the international brands. These international brands have more financial resources, which again might influence the brand-related content of the YouTubers collaborating with that brand.

Another limitation is how this study relies on interviews with retrospective questions. Sometimes participants could not come up with examples to illustrate their perceptions, or they could not recall the examples of brand-related videos that were suggested during the interviews. In the future, researchers could perhaps inform the participants about the interviews revolving around their perceptions of brand-related content, and give them the task to look up some of those brand-related videos and write down their initial responses. During the interviews the participants could then elaborate on those initial responses. Another option is to have the participants watch a few different brand-related videos during the interviews, and to discuss those right away. Perhaps the information retrieved would be richer and more representative of how they truly feel about the brand-related content they consume, increasing the ecological validity of the research (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Finally, in order to gain more insight in the effects of brand-related content on the experience of parasocial relationships, longitudinal or experimental research is necessary. For example, it might be of value to consider an experimental study, where the reactions towards different types of brand-related content and non-brand-related content are measured. Also, quantitative research is necessary to study the extent to which the perceptions described in the present study occur in a representative sample of those experiencing parasocial relationships on YouTube.

References

- Bond, B. J. (2016). Following your 'friend': Social media and the strength of adolescents' parasocial relationships with media personae. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 19(11), 656-660. doi: 10.1089/cyber.2016.0355

- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Burmann, C. (2010). A call for ‘user-generated branding’. *Journal of Brand Management*, 18(1), 1-4. doi:10.1057/bm.2010.30
- Chen, C. (2016). Forming digital self and parasocial relationships on YouTube. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 16(1), 232–254. doi:10.1177/1469540514521081
- Chung, S., & Cho, H. (2014). Parasocial relationship via reality TV and social media: its implications for celebrity endorsement. *Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 47-54. doi:10.1145/2602299.2602306
- Cohen, J. (2003). Parasocial breakups: Measuring individual differences in responses to the dissolution of parasocial relationships. *Mass Communication and Society*, 6(2), 191-202. doi:10.1207/S15327825MCS0602_5
- Creswell, J., & Miller, D. (2000). Determining validity in qualitative inquiry. *Theory Into Practice*, 39(3), 124-130.
- Dias, P. (2016). Motivations for multi-screening: An exploratory study on motivations and gratifications. *European Journal of Communication*, 31(6), 678–693. doi:10.1177/0267323116674111
- Dibble, J. L., Hartmann, T., & Rosaen, S. F. (2016). Parasocial Interaction and Parasocial Relationship: Conceptual Clarification and a Critical Assessment of Measures. *Human Communication Research*, 42(1), 21–44. doi:10.1111/hcre.12063
- Giles, A. C. (2002). Parasocial Interaction: A review of the literature and a model for future research. *Media Psychology*, 4(3), 279-305. doi:10.1207/S1532785XMEP0403_04

- Horton, D., & Wohl, R. R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry, 19*(3), 215–229.
- Hu, M. (2016). The influence of a scandal on parasocial relationship, parasocial interaction, and parasocial breakup. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture, 5*(3), 217-231.
doi:10.1037/ppm0000068
- Katz, E., Blumler, J., & Gurevitch, M. (1973). Uses and gratifications research. *The Public Opinion Quarterly, 37*(4), 509-523.
- Rubin, R. B., & McHugh, M. P. (1987). Development of parasocial interaction relationships. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 31*(3), 279-292.
doi:10.1080/08838158709386664
- Shafer, D. M., Carbonara, C. P., & Popova, L. (2011). Spatial presence and perceived reality as predictors of motion-based video game enjoyment. *Presence: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments, 20*(6), 591-619. doi:10.1162/PRES_a_00084
- Strauss, A. L. (1987). *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tongco, M. D. C. (2007). Purposive sampling as a tool for informant selection. *Ethnobotany Research and Applications, 5*, 147-158.