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Forming Parasocial Relationships in Online Communities

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ABSTRACT

Parasocial interaction theory has been used to describe the one-sided relationships that can occur between a media user and the media being consumed. Used to understand the process by which individuals form attachments to media personae, the theory may also help explain the behavior of those consumers who use Internet-based online communities. This paper provides an overview of parasocial interaction theory, and explores how parasocial interaction can affect the consumption behavior of online community users. Following a review of the extant literature, a number of research questions are outlined to help guide future research in this area.

INTRODUCTION

An emergent stream of research in the marketing literature has been to understand how consumers interact with each other using the Internet through online (or virtual) communities (e.g., Bagozzi and Dholakia 2002; Kozinets 1999, 2002). An implicit assumption in research to date has been that all consumers will eventually decide to interact with other users online. As a consequence, the importance of those users who merely browse for information, rather than actively participate in an online community has been overlooked. The aim of this paper is to introduce the concept of parasocial interaction (Horton and Wohl 1956)—a theory which examines the interaction between a media user and the media being consumed—in order to understand how lurkers (i.e., those people who unobtrusively read, but not write about a consumption interest online) may form relationships with other online users. After a review of the extant literature, this paper explores how parasocial interaction can affect the consumption behavior of participants using an online community, and provides a set of research questions to help guide future research efforts.

WHY STUDY ONLINE COMMUNITIES?

The importance of online communities to business was first explored by Armstrong and Hagel (1996). Arguing that online communities provide an opportunity for organizations to build new and deeper relationships with customers, the authors suggested that commercial success for any business with an online presence would be contingent on providing virtual communities that meet multiple social and economic needs. The integral role of online communities was further reinforced by Kozinets (1999), who posited that by understanding these communities and the opportunities they present, companies may gain insight into changes that are occurring in the way people decide on which products or services they should consume, as well as how they should consume them. Moreover, Kozinets (2002) suggested that the reasons for marketing interest in online communities are twofold. First, given that a critical influence upon brand preference is consumer advocacy, online communities, where consumers attempt to inform and influence fellow consumers about products and brands should be of considerable interest to any company. Second, since an important role of marketing research is to understand the decision-making influences of particular consumers and consumer groups, online communities provide another opportunity for marketers to study the tastes, desires, and needs of those consumers who interact in such forums.

Kozinets (1999) posited that five types of online communities are suitable for consumers to use to discuss consumption related

activities. The first of these, boards (e.g., USENET-based newsgroups), are typically based around specific products, activities, or interests which may be relevant to marketing researchers interested in consumer topics. Second, independent web pages (e.g., web-based message boards), provide an opportunity for consumers to exchange ideas using a web-based interface. The third type of community, lists (e.g., listservs), are e-mail mailing lists which are based around a certain topic of common interest. Lastly, multi-user dungeons and chat rooms are the final two types of online communities available to consumers. It is considered that these two community types contain information that is often less market oriented (e.g., Kozinets 2002), as they can often contain material that may be of a fantastical, social, sexual, or relational nature. Further, in terms of which types of forums are most suitable for exchanging information related to consumption related activities, the first three types (i.e., boards, independent web pages, and lists) can be considered as being more suitable.

In the literature, authors such as Kozinets (1999) have posited that the longer an Internet user spends online, the more likely they are to gravitate towards an online group of one sort or another. Once a consumer connects and interacts with others online, it is assumed that they will become a recurring member of one or more of these communities, and over time, increasingly turn to them as a source of information and social interaction. Similarly, Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002) emphasized the notion of “we intentions”, arguing that an individuals desire to participate in an online community is a result of individual determinant (e.g., positive anticipated emotions and desires) and community influences (e.g., social identity). Such approaches to understanding individual participation in online communities however, ignore the idea that some individuals may not decide to actively participate in online communities. Instead, rather than engaging with other users online, they may decide to unobtrusively read, but not write about their consumption interests. Consequently, the role of lurkers in online communities has often been overlooked.

Kozinets (1999) argued that the formation of a relationship with any online community was based on two non-independent factors: (1) the relationship a person has with a consumption activity, and (2) the intensity of relationship an individual has with other members of the online community. Using these two factors, the author outlined a typology of four distinct community member types: devotees, insiders, tourists, and minglers. Devotees are those people who possess a strong interest in a consumption activity, but have few strong social ties to other members of the online community. Insiders also have a strong personal interest in a consumption activity, but instead have strong social ties to other community members. Tourists lack strong ties with either the focal consumption interest or with other members of the online community. Finally, minglers maintain strong social ties with other members, but hold little interest in the consumption activity being discussed. Using the definitions provided by Kozinets (1999), devotees and tourists can be viewed as conceptually similar to lurkers in that they maintain weak social ties to a community. For example, they may not interact with other users, but instead use the information provided by others to meet their consumption-related informational needs. Given this, a key area of potential research interest is to understand how active participants within an online community are able to influence the decision-making processes of non-participa-

tive members. Drawing from the media and communications literature, parasocial interaction theory may provide some direction to help understand how non-participative users of an online community are influenced by the opinions of other more vocal (and active) members of that community.

PARASOCIAL INTERACTION THEORY

The concept of parasocial interaction has become well established in the media and communication literature since the term first appeared in an article by Horton and Wohl (1956). Parasocial interaction was originally defined as the apparent face-to-face interaction that can occur between media characters and their audience. While audience members consist of users of mass media, media characters can include several types of media figures (or personae) such as presenters, actors, or celebrities. The behavior of a persona during each interaction event (e.g., television program, commercial, or talk show interview) helps a viewer to form an opinion about that character, which the viewer then carries into the next parasocial episode (e.g., Auter 1992; Perse and Rubin 1989).

As with interpersonal relationships, these opinions will then influence a viewer's feeling about the personas behavior, which will then affect the parasocial relationship with that person (Alperstein 1991). Moreover, even though each encounter with a media persona will foster some degree of parasocial interaction, strong feelings about a media character will occur only after an individual has been exposed to a number of parasocial encounters (Auter 1992). It is with these repeated encounters that a viewer will gain increased attributional confidence about the media personality (e.g., Perse and Rubin 1989). Conceptually, parasocial relationships can be thought of as being similar to an interpersonal social interaction or relationship, although they typically consist of a much weaker bond.

In one sense, a viewer of a television program or other media event is meeting with the performer (Skumanich and Kintsfather 1998). Over time, these meetings may lead a viewer to begin experiencing feelings of intimacy with the performer as if they were a close friend. As the 'relationship' intensifies, viewing may increase in order to maintain the friendship (e.g., Rubin, Perse, and Powell 1985). Moreover, viewing episodes may become ritualistic in nature, in that these viewing episodes may be planned for by a viewer, and they may become an important part of the viewers daily life. Following Horton and Wohl (1956), viewers may try to affirm their loyalty through sending mail, collecting memorabilia of the performer, and purchasing products recommended by the performer. Research on parasocial interaction has been conducted in contexts such as the relationships that children have with their favorite television characters (e.g., Hoffner 1996), the role of parasocial interaction when people listen to talkback radio (e.g., Hofstetter and Gianos 1997; Rubin and Step 2000), and the formation of parasocial relationships when shoppers watch a cable home shopping channel (e.g., Stephens, Hill, and Bergman 1996). In the context of the Internet, Hoerner (1999) developed a parasocial interaction scale, although this measure was focused on measuring the parasocial interaction potential of fictitious persona on a company website.

Television programs, along with other media content (e.g., advertisements), are able to create the illusion of interpersonal contact when media figures speak directly out of the television and address the audience personally. Horton and Wohl (1956) described this type of interaction as creating the illusion of *intimacy at a distance*. In previous studies (e.g., Alperstein 1991), participants have described parasocial interaction while consuming media content in terms of being transported to another sometimes disorienting world where they become involved in the interactions of

those characters who appear in programming and commercials. This experience is also tied to the concept of suspension of disbelief, in which viewers fall out of touch with the real world, and in touch with their imaginary social world.

Other authors (e.g., Auter 1992) have further developed this idea with the concept of a media character breaking the fourth wall. This idea refers to the notion of a media personality stepping out of character to address an audience. For example, in television, like film and theatre, plots usually unfold within a three-walled environment. The fourth wall is the imaginary wall that separates a character from the audience. By breaking the fourth wall, the parasociability of a character is assumed to increase due to three main reasons. These reasons include: (1) the character that breaks the wall becomes more dominant due to their awareness of both the characters they are interacting with, and the audience behind the wall, (2) it helps acknowledge that the program is merely fiction, and (3) by directly addressing the audience (and adjusting to supposed responses), the persona raises the level of intimacy with the audience, thereby raising the interactivity level of the content.

Is Parasocial Interaction Desirable?

Early research on parasocial interaction assumed it was a form of dysfunctional behavior (e.g., Sood and Rogers 2000). As such, it was thought to result from factors such as neuroticism, isolation, loneliness, fear, a lack of adequate leisure activities, as well as limited opportunities for social interaction. Cohen (1997) surmised that parasocial relations may substitute for diminished interpersonal contact. In past research on motivations for television viewing, it has been found (e.g., Rubin et al. 1985) that like interpersonal interaction, television is often viewed as a way to battle loneliness. Consequently, television viewing in general, and parasocial interaction more specifically, are often seen as substituting for interpersonal relationships. However, Rubin et al. (1985) found there was no correlation between loneliness and the intensity of viewers' parasocial relationship with onscreen characters. Such findings regarding the use of parasocial relationships to help alleviate loneliness thus suggest that parasocial interaction may function to broaden the scope of interpersonal relations a person has, rather than compensate for a lack of relationships.

Other authors (e.g., Auter 1992) have noted that parasocial interaction has been treated as a need or motivational state in most research. For example, parasocial interaction is one of many important outcomes that audience members may seek when they select television shows to view. Moreover, parasocial interaction has also been established as an important determinant of media use, and an important concept to be investigated from a uses and gratifications perspective (e.g., Conway and Rubin 1991). Further, in contexts such as television news, parasocial interaction has been predicted by factors like higher levels of news realism, and feeling happy while watching the news (Perse 1990). These results have been used to suggest that parasocial interaction can also be predicted by emotional involvement. For example, Perse (1990) discovered that feeling happy while watching the news was related to parasocial interaction. However, feeling sad or angry was unrelated to parasocial interaction.

Although parasocial relationships are based on simulated interaction, they can continue beyond the viewing period when viewers experience characters as close friends they would like to meet (e.g., Skumanich and Kintsfather 1998). With this, parasocial relationships complement social relationships, and are better understood as part of a viewer's social life. It is perhaps not surprising that evidence has been gathering in support of the similarity between parasocial and social relationships. For example, viewers will judge media characters using many of the same criteria as those

they use to judge other people they meet (Perse and Rubin 1989), and there are similar patterns in the development of social and parasocial relationships (Rubin and McHugh 1987). Overall, parasocial relationships resemble social relationships, and although they may often be less salient and intense than close social relationships, for many television viewers, relationships with television characters and other celebrities are a constant, large, and in many instances—important part of their social world (Skumanich and Kintsfather 1998). Perse and Rubin (1989) also state that parasocial interactions resemble interpersonal friendships in three ways. First, parasocial relationships (like friendships) are voluntary, and often contain a personal focus. Second, both types of relationships provide companionship, and third, social attraction is a precursor to either type of relationship.

Although parasocial interaction is based on vicarious interaction (e.g., television viewing) rather than actual interaction, viewers often feel that they know and understand the persona in the same intimate way that they know and understand their flesh-and-blood friends. This type of parasocial relationship is based on the belief that a media personality is like other people in the viewer's social circle. Moreover, viewer involvement can often enhance parasocial interaction, and parasocial interaction may mirror social interaction. Increased interaction (i.e., increased viewing levels) and perceived self-disclosure through the medium may lead to a reduction of uncertainty, and deeper perceived intimacy with, and liking of the mediated characters (e.g., Perse and Rubin 1989). Similarly, Turner (1993) examined interpersonal and psychological predictors of parasocial interaction with television performers. Adopting the idea of homophily, or the tendency for friendships to form between people that are alike in some designated respect, the author found that attitude homophily was the best predictor of parasocial interaction. The two other dimensions of homophily (physical appearance and the media character having a similar background to that of the viewer) were not correlated as strongly.

The Parasociability of Different Media

Media messages can vary in their 'parasociability' for a variety of reasons (e.g., Auter 1992). In sum, this potential is influenced by the ability for a medium to approximate reality and content characteristics, such as the dominance of lead figures, as well as personae who regularly appear in the program (or in other media contexts). Television in general, and programming with recurring characters in particular, are considered to be higher in interaction potential than other media types. According to Horton and Strauss (1957) however, parasocial interaction can also exist even in those face-to-face situations where there are large audiences (e.g., show or lecture), where there is a large gap in status between a performer and their audience. This can also arise due to the audience being so large that a speaker cannot address audience members individually. Such a situation is similar to that encountered with the Internet. For example, while many people may visit an online community, given a large number of users, it is unlikely that an individual user would be able to directly interact with all other users online. Consequently, a common scenario would be that while a user might be able to interact with some community members, they would have to observe the interactions of many others. In the instance of non-participative members (i.e., lurkers, and perhaps devotees and tourists), these people would only be able to read the interactions between other online community participants. Given the potential for such a large number of one-sided interactions, parasocial interaction provides a theoretical contribution to understanding how non-participative online community users may process the information put forward by other online users. Moreover, questions are raised about how this information is

then integrated into the consumption-related decision-making of those non-participative consumers, and then ultimately reflected in their actual behavior. Building on the theory presented thus far, this paper will now outline three research questions to guide future research in this area.

HOW DOES PARASOCIAL INTERACTION DEVELOP ONLINE?

Cole and Leets (1999) provided an overview of three relational development theories that may offer some insight into the formation of parasocial relationships in online communities. The first of these is uncertainty reduction theory, which suggests that relationships develop over time through a process of increased certainty (e.g., Berger 1986). As uncertainty decreases, liking increases, and relationships are developed through being able to predict the other's behavior. Second, and quite similarly, is personal construct theory. This theory suggests that viewers of media figures develop a sense of 'knowing' media characters by applying their interpersonal construct systems to the parasocial context (e.g., Perse and Rubin 1989). Third, social exchange theory (e.g., Homans 1961) offers explanatory value to the process of parasocial interaction by connecting intimacy and relationship importance to a cost and reward assessment, where a parasocial interaction with a media personality would have a high reward and low cost exchange.

Thus, a research question becomes whether these three perspectives provide any utility in explaining the formation of parasocial relationships in online communities. For example, when online, how do non-participative community users interpret the messages put forward by active users? In the instance of regular contributors (or posters) to an online community, so long as the poster identifies themselves consistently with the same user name, how does a non-participative user develop a sense of understanding and potential parasocial relationship with an active user? Such a relationship would be with regard to the online personality of that user, and their behavior when they contribute to an online community. Further, the issue of how a parasocial relationship that is formed with an active user then influences the consumption-related attitudes and behavior of non-participative users is also of interest. With this, the first research question is:

RQ1: What relational development theories provide the most utility in explaining how parasocial relationships are formed and evaluated in online communities?

Attachment styles also play a key role in how people experience close relationships. In previous parasocial interaction research (e.g., Cole and Leets 1999), a three-category scheme of attachment styles was used to understand how people form parasocial relationships. These three categories include: (1) secure individuals, who hold a variety of positive expectations that will result in relational interactions and outcomes, (2) anxious-ambivalent people, who, driven by their fear of being alone and disappointment that their partners do not live up to their idealized expectations, are more likely to engage in an extreme range of behaviors which will ultimately lead to relational dissolution, and (3) avoidant individuals, who have a difficult time trusting others, and often engage in behaviors designed to keep others at a comfortable distance. In the context of television, the authors found that willingness to form a parasocial bond with a favorite television personality was related to the attachment beliefs of an individual. Specifically, it was determined that people with an anxious-ambivalent style of attachment were most likely to form a relationship with their favorite television personality. Additionally, avoidant individuals were least likely to form parasocial bonds with television personalities.

Another research question thus becomes whether attachment styles affect how a person uses an online community. The way attachment styles may offer some understanding is twofold. First, whether attachment styles predict how likely an individual is to use an online community, and if they do, whether they influence their online behavior (e.g., a user deciding to become an active or non-participative community member). Second, for non-participative users, whether attachment styles affect the extent to which a non-participative user is able to form a parasocial relationship with active users in an online community. Thus, the second research question is:

RQ2: Do attachment styles influence the degree to which parasocial interaction can occur when using an online community?

A potential way of understanding how consumers come to rely on online communities for their informational needs was provided by Grant, Guthrie, and Ball-Rokeach (1991). Proposing a hierarchy of dependency relations, the authors argued that television dependency would lead to a dependency on a genre of television programming, which would then lead to the development of parasocial relationships with the hosts of specific programs. A similar relationship was outlined by Rubin and McHugh (1987), and a model of mediated relationship development was provided by the authors. In this model, television exposure was predicted to lead to a degree of attraction towards a televised character. From here, social, physical, and task attraction were predicted to lead to parasocial interaction, which would then ultimately predict the perceived importance of a relationship with that televised character.

It is also possible that a similar process may occur when consumers first start using the Internet. Indeed, Kozinets (1999) posited that the longer an Internet user spends online, the more likely it is that they will gravitate towards some type of online group, thus suggesting that some type of medium to genre dependency is possible with the Internet. Once a user then decides to visit an online community, the issue of how that user relates to active users of that forum is of interest. Thus, the third research question is:

RQ3: Can the development of parasocial relationships with members of an online community be explained by a hierarchy of dependence relations?

Beyond the framework discussed in the previous section, the issue of how the formation of parasocial relationships in online communities manifests itself in actual consumption behavior is also of interest. Expanding on the two relationship development frameworks already outlined, Skumanich and Kintsfather (1998) developed a model for individual media dependency effects, which was applied to understanding television shopping behavior. In terms of understanding the consumption-related behavior of online community users, this model may also be adapted to understand the potential effects of parasocial interaction in this new medium (see figure 1).

The model posits that for online community dependency to occur, an individual must have a pre-existing dependency with (and also be using) the Internet. This dependency with an online community is then predicted to lead to increased parasocial interaction, which then leads to increased usage of that community. The mediating role of parasocial interaction is reinforced by the inclusion of a direct path from online community dependency to online community usage. Moreover, and similar to Kozinets (1999), a direct path flows from Internet usage to the usage of online

communities. Finally, online community usage may lead to consumption-related behavior (e.g., a non-participative online community user may decide what product to purchase, decide to switch to another brand advocated by active members of an online community, etc.) A feedback loop is also included, indicating that subsequent to some type of consumption-related behavior occurring, an online community member will then return to the community.

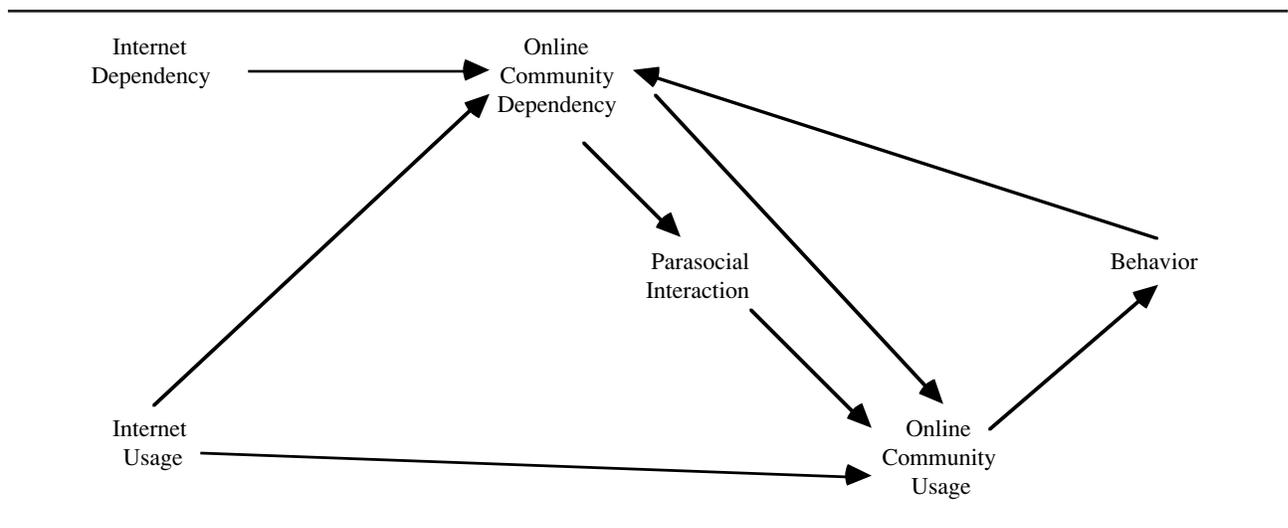
SUMMARY

This paper has provided an introduction as to how parasocial interaction theory might be used to understand consumers use of online communities. While parasocial interaction is not a new concept, it is a theory that has not yet been applied to the study of those consumers who use an online community. Given the important role of online communities in developing consumer preferences through the advocacy of other users, the development of theory to help explain how active participants within an online community can influence the consumption behavior of other non-participative users becomes critical. It is hoped that some of the ideas presented in this paper will provide initial direction for researchers interested in further understanding the behavior of consumers who use online communities.

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FIGURE 1
Adapted Model for Media Dependency Effects in Online Communities



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